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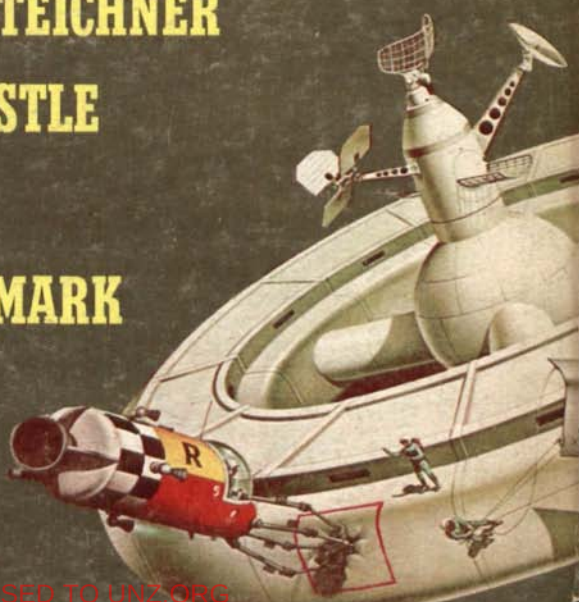

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NO. 2

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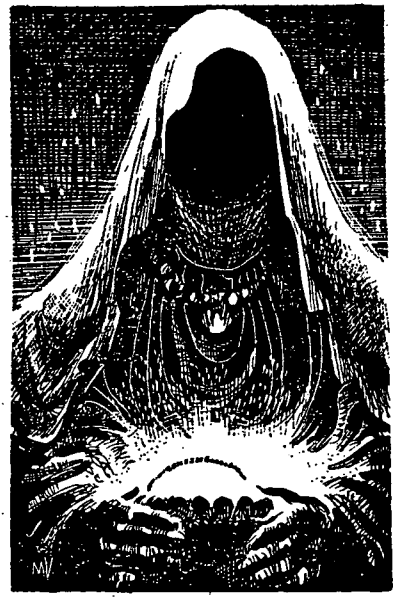
Five famous science-fiction authors pool their talents in this "round-robin" novelette that stretches man almost to the breaking point on the rack of Time and Space. Here is a rare pyrotechnic display of sf writing skills and styles.



THE COVENANT

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Part One

By Poul Anderson

By POUL ANDERSON
ISAAC ASIMOV
ROBERT SHECKLEY
MURRAY LEINSTER
ROBERT BLOCH

ILLUSTRATOR VARGA

"TIME," she said.

Ban stirred, uneasy in this dim and rustling air. From outside, he would not have thought The Oracles wide enough to hold as many rooms as now appeared to stretch, doorway beyond arched doorway, further than he could see. Or was this a single great many-vaulted chamber? He didn't know. It was too dark to tell. Too many wings moved under the invisible ceiling. He wondered where the light came from, what little there was of it.

"I beg your pardon, prophetess?" His voice sounded strange in the bones of his head. "I don't quite understand."

"It is as well," said the one who sat across the black table. Her face was not veiled, and he should have been able to see what she looked like. But somehow he had only a blurred impression — eyes which caught more light than they should, so that they became blind luminous ellipses —perhaps, he guessed confusedly, more than somewhat afraid, it was because he could not stop watching her hands. They lay palms down on the table, relaxed, but with strength in every line. They had less taper than a woman's hands commonly do, but he

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thought he had never seen any so beautiful.

"If you understood," she said, "you might not dare to act."

That touched his pride. He sat up straight, clenching his gun, and answered: "Prophetess, the Cloud People killed friends of mine. Also, I am the son of the Warden—I have duties—" He faltered beneath her gaze. Something scuttered across the dusky stone floor. Pompousness drained from him. Almost wryly, he finished, "If the Cloud People take the City itself, what Wardenship will there be for me to succeed to?"

Did she nod? "Yes," her low tones replied, "there will be nothing then but the Heaths . . . a few lonely huts where men huddle and mutter, forgetting they ever raised a City . . ." After a pause: "Time is the strength of the Cloud People, even as Space is the strength of man. What you must overcome is Time itself."

Ban sat in twilight, and the rustlings and whisperings seemed to go around and around his head, but he could only see the hands of the prophetess. He fumbled for comprehension: "A man may walk or ride or fly in Space—from here to there—but no man can swim Time's river. Unless you—What is an Oracle? One who has mastered Time, ever so little perhaps, but not altogether helpless before it?"

She made no answer. "Forgive me," he said. "I am surely wrong. I didn't mean you were merely human, prophetess."

"There was an age once, which may come again if the last men flee out onto the Heaths, when lightning destroyed where it would," she told him. "Now, a hundred times a year, the highest towers of the City are crowned with lightning, and unhurt. That is one force which men have come to understand a little; and so they are not its pawns. There are others. Once, it may be, there were many others. But the world is very old, and much has been forgotten."

Then the silence lengthened so unendurably that he got the courage, or the desperation, to remind her: "Prophetess, I came to ask on behalf of the City—of all mankind, maybe—how the Cloud People can be overcome. For none of our weapons has served. You have not replied to my question."

"Not yet," she said. "Not ever, in full. For there is no destiny. Time is not a single river, sweeping from the birth

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of the stars to their last cinders. It is more akin to a huge many-branched delta."

She sighed. "Armies have been broken. So by now, Captain Ban, you should know the uselessness of armies. One man alone, though—"

Her words were like fingers closing on his heart. But he found the strength to say, "Myself."

"I can tell you nothing." The shakenness in her voice was the most unnerving thing of all. "I can promise you nothing. I can only say, go secretly and alone to the island. Remember that Time is the strength of the Cloud People, but Space is the strength of man, and remember that in the end Time and Space are the same. More than that, I cannot say. It is too dark."

The beautiful hands rose to cover the face he had never quite seen. "It has always been too dark," she screamed. "Go!"

Ban rose. He didn't even stop to make obeisance. He almost ran, stumbling over his feet and his gun. For a moment the room echoed with his noise, then he lost awareness of the echoes because his own heartbeat grew so loud.

When he emerged on the terrace—never quite sure how he had done so—it was like waking from nightmare. He spent a while simply leaning on the rail, breathing hard. Piece by piece, he began to recognize familiarity. He looked a thousand sheer feet down the black side of The Oracles to an incongruous park where clipped trees and formal flowerbeds made star patterns. Several other towers were visible, though even at this height the City stretched too wide to be encompassed in a glance. He saw the colonnaded tiers of Alpha, graceful against a deep blue late-afternoon sky; the startling red slimness of The Needle; the shifting polychrome which rescued the massive facade of Arsenal from monotony. The sun was low, striking long rays between those walls, flaming off windows and making parks, forests, gardens, crop fields glow an impossibly intense green. Here and there the light flashed off wings, bird or human. And far on the eastern edge of the world lay a blinding silvery gleam of sea.

It was quiet up here. A breeze ruffled Ban's sweat-dampened yellow hair. He shivered, drawing the tunic closer about his big young body. From somewhere, freakishly borne across a mile or

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two, he heard faint merry strains of music. Hard to believe that anyone could dance to a ballad while the Cloud People haired on this same planet. But he had done it himself, a few days ago. (Only days? It felt like centuries, now.) Life persisted unto the final destruction, and life was not a single thread. It was war and defeat and misery, yes, but it was also eating and sleeping and lovemaking and playing games to pass idle hours and looking at the stars with wonder and disputing with your blacksmith neighbor whose shop got too noisy and—

Urmuz came from behind one of the weeping willows which, with stone seats and an intricately playing fountain, ornamented this terrace. He looked out of place here, his great frame squat and hairy in a black tunic, his face battered beneath a military helmet. "What did she say, sir?" he rumbled. "Any help at all?"

Ban blinked, stared around him, clasped his gun as if to draw strength from iron. He felt dimly surprised, through all the turmoil within him, that he should reply with coolness, "I don't know. I did get some advice. But who ever heard of an Oracle making a straight answer?"

Urmuz spat. "Old Mother Grotta, on the twelfth floor, she'll speak plain. I told you not to monkey around with these here upper-level seeresses. Let's go find Mother Grotta right now."

Ban actually chuckled. "I don't need homely common sense, Urmuz, or a fake love philtre—"

"Dammit, captain, her love philtres work! I know!"

"The situation has gone beyond that." Ban's smile vanished, though his lips remained tense. "I suppose it was always beyond that, though we realized too late what the coming of the Cloud People meant."

"What good are these upper-level prophetesses?" persisted Urmuz. "They're frauds, captain, that's what they are. Their words're so bloody vague that after things've happened, they can always claim that's what they meant. Me, I'll waste my money on blondes and booze."

"Be quiet!" Ban yelled. "What do you know about it, you mud-brained sub-level mechanic? Go back to school and learn about the prediction paradox, at least, before you start quacking—" He saw the ugly face stricken, and knew he was only venting his own fear. Urmuz had stood with

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him in the last battle, when others fled and the Cloud People laughed unseen. Urmuz had guided his first baby footsteps, and taught him to handle a gun, and carried him home from youthful nights when they drank down stars and moon and sang the sun awake . . . "I'm sorry," said Ban. "Nerves."

"Nothing to be sorry about, captain," said Urmuz. "Part of my job, being cussed out. Well, so what did she tell us to do?"

Ban looked away. "I have to do it alone," he said. "Secretly."

Another emerged from the willows. She was as young as he, and her light white robe did not much hide fullness and suppleness. The loose hair streaming down her back was the color of a sunset after storm, and her eyes were great and gray in a sweetly shaped face. "Ban," she said, making his name beautiful to him. "Captain Ban—"

"Yes?" He turned with eagerness to watch her, thinking that he would probably not have many more hours to watch anything at all.

She stopped before him, flushing, and they stood a while in mutual awkwardness.

Finally she sighed. "May you reveal what the prophetess told you?" she asked.

Ban shook his head. "Best I don't."

"He has to go somewhere secret," blurted Urmuz. "Why don't you wait here, captain, and I'll get our kit and we can start right out?"

"At once?" breathed the girl.

"I think so," said Ban. "No way to tell when the Cloud People will attack next, but it will be soon—and that next attack will bring them to the edge of the City."

She looked seaward and shivered. "Mists out there," she said, "and cold, and thin singing. Is that how it will be?"

"If we don't stop them," he said. "Yes, I'd better leave at once."

Before I become so afraid I can't leave at all, he thought.

"I'll get our kit, sir," repeated Urmuz.

"You stay here," said Ban.

"Sir!"

All at once Ban had no strength left to argue. "Very well," he said. "Go fetch the stuff, then, and come back here."

"Yes, sir!" Urmuz snapped a salute.

"Don't tell anyone," said Ban. "Not even my father."

"No, sir. Of course not."

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Urmuz touched the flight stud on his brass belt. The wings unfolded from the flat pack under his tunic, catching the light in a gauzy metallic shimmer. The noise of his takeoff resounded loudly among the willows.

When he was out of sight, Ban took the girl's hands. She tried to withdraw them. "Please," she whispered. "Don't. I am her attendant—"

"And someday you'll be her successor," he said bitterly, not letting go. "Oh, yes. But still, if the Covenant allowed me to come up here, again and again, and allowed you to sit by me and talk in the moonlight, surely I can touch you when I say good-bye!"

She gulped and stopped pulling. Her head drooped.

"What is your name?" he asked.

"I haven't any," she said in a hurt, uncertain tone. "You know that."

"You must have had one once, before your mother gave you to the prophetess. What was it?"

"Please," she begged again.

He released her. One hand smacked against his bare thigh, the other clamped on his gun. "All right," he said harshly. "As you will. Good-bye."

"You aren't—your man won't be back till—"

"I sent him off to get rid of him," said Ban. "Someone has to go, and alone . . . she told me. It may as well be myself."

"No!" she cried. "Someone else, Ban!"

"I am the Warden's son," he declared, "and you won't tell me your name. So good-bye."

He opened his wings with a savage blow on the belt control, and whipped off the terrace while her mouth was still parting to speak.

After a moment he realized how childishly melodramatic his exit had been. A mature man wouldn't have sped off like this—the very absence of farewells underlining his self-sacrificing heroism and similar egotistic noises. But it was too late now. Stubbornness, resentment, the fear of looking foolish, were stronger than survival instinct.

His wings rotated hard and steadily. He must squint into the speed of his own passage, and felt cold in a mere tunic. The brass belt contained, in its various compartments, basic field equipment and a few days' emergency rations. But he should have gotten full kit. A helmet, at the very least—

Well, he thought with sudden excitement, well, he wasn't really about to embark on

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any one-man campaign of reconquest. The prophetess had only said to go secretly to the island. Doubtless that meant nothing but a spying-out expedition—closer, to be sure, than anyone had yet dared approach a stronghold of the Cloud People, but still, just a quick investigation. He might be back before dawn, and Urmuz would make him a stiff drink and— He shook his head, as if to clear the last of that oracular twilight from it, and tried to look sanely out on a sane world.

Once or twice he passed a hovering citizen, and they hailed him, but he continued and soon had left them all behind. No one ventured far out over the sea any longer.

Nonetheless, the realization broke through his thoughts with a shock: that he *was* now above the water. He looked behind, seeking a final view of home. The sun exploded in his vision. For minutes that burning after-image remained. When he could see again, there were no towers, no beach, only dark choppy waves.

He didn't need map or compass to tell him he was bound due east, cutting across the Gulf of Orea toward Mwyrland. He had flown this way often enough, in boyhood years before the Cloud People came. (Where now were the green Mwyrland hills, the cottage of Ilbur the Robot with smoke lazing up from its chimney, the girl who shyly brought him milk in a wooden bowl? He remembered the sound of bells, and the belling of hounds when he hunted, but now there was nothing there but fog, gray fog and the Cloud People flitting and singing in a cold formless gray—where had Mwyrland gone? Indeed Time was a mystery which men did not comprehend.) He had usually passed over the island which marked the halfway point. Even then it had been a swart volcanic desolation; now the mists had reached that far westward and the island could no longer be seen. Scouts flying close thought they had glimpsed black towers on it, through an occasional rift in the fog, but they were never sure—

There!

The vapor bank rose like a mountain. Ban swallowed panic and slanted downward. This was as close as those scouts who returned had ever ventured. A few had tried to fly into the swirling thick mass of the cloud itself, but they had not come home.

It was very silent here.

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When he landed, retracting wings through his tunic slits into the unit on his back, Ban felt the water chilly around his knees. A few streamers of fog curled and smoked; the waves were stilled. The sun was directly behind him, already blurred. Ahead was no sharp demarcation. The air simply grew murkier, until at last blackness loomed from water to sky, cutting off half the world.

Ban hefted his gun and started wading.

That was the idea which had sprung into his head, when the prophetess said to go alone to the island. Anyone else would approach from the air—would he not?—and the Cloud People would see him (or hear him, or whatever they did for awareness) and destroy him. But the island shelved very gradually toward open water. There were places where, at low tide, you could walk knee deep for miles until you reached shore. In fog and night, would even the Cloud People know of a single man walking through the sea?

The water splashed with his passage. Its cold stung him. The air was frigid, too, with a dank taste. Despite all need for caution, he cherished his own little noise, for otherwise he was totally alone. Grayness thickened; the sun was a blur at his back, heatless and cheerless, toppling toward the night only minutes away now. Ban unclipped the flashlight at his belt and tested its beam. Already it helped him. Hard to tell without it where water left off and the bleak, eddying air began. Mist streamed through the cone of light. Somewhere out in the unseen, he thought he heard dripping, as if the bowl of the sky were chilled and wet and dripping into the sea.

The sea felt heavy. He was getting higher all the time, now the water was hardly above his ankles, but it was an effort to shove it aside. He began stumbling more and more often on the irregular bottom, nearly dropping his gun. Seen by flashbeam and the last daylight, the weapon looked rusty. And it weighed in his hand. How it weighed! The flashlight, of thin inert metal, remained itself; but the gun barrel grew dull. Was there really a faint patina on his brass belt?

And when had he torn his clothes? Ban squinted through deepening gloom at his tunic. It hung from his bent shoulders, damp and rotten. He jerked a hand in startlement. The sleeve ripped apart and hung in rags. His belt certain-

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ly was tarnished, no, it was corroded, close to crumbling from his waist. The air was like ice; as it entered his lungs he coughed and cleared the rheum from his throat. His legs hurt, the knees weren't quite steady and he wanted to stop and rest but there was no place to rest. Was the sun down yet? Or had his eyes blurred on him? He rubbed them with the back of the hand that held the flashlight. He couldn't see so well. His legs were twin blotches. But his gaunt liver-spotted hand was still visible, if he held it close. He stroked it down his wet white beard—slowly, ever so slowly.

Time, he thought wearily, Time was the strength of . . . of who had she said? And with every step forward— His thoughts trailed off incoherently. He was too tired now to think, or be afraid, or anything except sleep. When he reached the black shore, maybe he could lie down and sleep. There had been something he meant to do there, but— He waded onward.

Part Two

By Isaac Asimov

THE land tottered under his feet, the last of the wavelets gone. Maybe— Maybe—

To sleep—sleep—

* * *

It was like the soft sound of chimes in his dull ear, the distant sound of thin singing. Where had he heard something like that?

A battle? A tall, rough man at his side? What was—his—name? Music—

Like thin sweet wind-torn words.

"There! He was almost gone!"

Ban heard that. His eyes

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flickered open and suddenly he knew he was Ban. Of course What was wrong? Where was he?

He could breathe more easily somehow. He lifted his hands and the tawny, yellowing hair of his chin caught on them and he stared foolishly at it, uncomprehending.

"Help me hold him," said the girl's voice.

How did he know it was a girl? There were no words, only a singing in his mind, and yet there were words and they were girl's words.

A different voice—different in what way?—but a boy's, said, "He's not that timevy."

"Timevy enough for me. Get under."

Ban struggled to his feet and stared about him. No one was holding him. No one was lifting him. The fog stretched out, luminously gray, not quite as dank as he remembered.

The sun, he thought suddenly. The sun must be gone by now. Why was it not night? The fog was still gray, as gray as the Prophetess' blank eyes. He remembered the Prophetess? What had she said?

The girl's voice sang, "I never saw one before."

"I did," said the boy. "I came out once where the fog closes in and saw one on—on — like — change — like — different—come and go."

Fly, thought Ban, catching the dim thought intuitively. The boy had no proper expression for it. We fly, he thought, we fly. He whirled around and spoke for the first time since the fog had closed him in. "Who are you?"

There was nothing, at first, just the voices, and as he turned and tried to beat the fog aside by force of eyes alone, there was a short smothered chime without words.

Then, "Here we are, Changeman."

They were like two coagulations, two clottings in the cloud; two shrouds with nothing inside.

He felt a chill and the hairs rose on his arms, so that he could feel their pressure against the sleeve of his tunic.

Oddly, his mind jumped backward. Hadn't the tunic been torn, shreded? He remembered feebly for it was all as foggy as the fog. He shone the flashlight on his sleeve and it was whole, thinned and worn with age, but whole.

Suddenly, he flashed the light in the direction of the Cloud People and there was nothing there. Musical wordless chimes in his ears was all.

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He moved the light away and the shrouds were there again.

He said, "What has happened to me?"

The boy's voice said briefly, "You fell." Then, "You Change People always fall, don't you know that."

"Fell?" He looked down, shrinking automatically from an unseen and non-existent cliff.

"*Fell,*" said the girl. "You are so silly."

"They don't know," said the boy.

"Tell him," said the girl.

"I don't think we ought to."

"Who cares? I want to watch his top move when he talks. Do you see it in among the fringe, there."

"The fringe came when he fell. It always does."

Ban stared, feeling worn with the accumulating strain. They were discussing him and by fringe they must mean his beard.

It hit him with the shock of cold water colliding after a dive. His *beard.* He had no beard. He felt it and it was there and was yellow but it had been white.

He said, "Even so, I've grown old." He felt the brittleness in his knees, so noticeable against the lithe strength he remembered.

"You fell," said the boy, explaining.

I fell, thought Ban, and I grew old. He said, certain, "I fell through time. How?"

"I don't know. You Change People always fall. You can't lift up."

Again Ban was remembering: Time is the strength of the Cloud People.

She had said that. The Prophetess had said that. Hadn't she said more?

But he wasn't as old now as he had been. His beard was no longer white. His uniform was no longer in shreds. *They* had held him, the boy and the girl. They had gotten under.

"Are you holding me now?" he demanded.

"Of course," said the boy, "or you'd fall."

"Lift me higher, then."

"Why?"

"So I can talk."

It was like feeling air come into clogged lungs, or slowly straightening a cramped muscle. The beard shrank to a yellow inch and his gun was almost glossy. He looked at it and at his jagged fingernails, then pointed the gun in the direction of the figures, automatically.

The girl's voice said, "What's that, ——— ——— ———?"

(She concluded with a clear

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musical triad which did not resolve itself into words. Was it the boy's name?)

The boy said, "It throws a piece of metal. It can't hurt, but if he tries I'll drop him at once."

Ban put the gun down hastily. He had to find out. He might get back. The Prophetess had sent him to find out. And if he didn't get back, even so— He might not get back— He would not—

Drearily, he thought that after all he might not die in some flaming instantaneous holocaust or under the crush or cut of steel, but peacefully of sleep and old, old age.

He was young enough now to laugh shortly. He said, "Why do I fall here? I don't fall back there." He jerked his head, not knowing in the least if he were gesturing in the right direction.

The girl said, eagerly, "The fog holds you up."

"No, it doesn't," said the boy at once. "Keep quiet, ——— ——— ———, you know nothing about it."

The girl made a spiteful little discord, a sound that resolved itself into nothing in Ban's mind.

The boy disregarded it. He said, "You do fall. Slowly."

Ban said, "Fall?"

"In your world," said the boy, "everything is a gentle slope, isn't it?"

"No," said Ban.

"Yes, it is," said the boy. "Our Knower has told us. Your world is a slope and you roll down it all the time. Down and down until you wear out and die."

Time, thought Ban, the inexorable flow of time. What had he said to the Prophetess? No man can swim Time's river. Or climb up Time's slope. One could only roll downward, or slide and slip downward, or, if one were at complete peace, walk downward.

"Time," he said aloud, as the Prophetess had said to introduce their recent meeting.

"And here," said the boy's chiming voice, "there is no slope. Here it is free and we can move as we wish, up and down—"

No, he didn't say "up and down." Ban caught at the nuances of the chimes. This was different. His mind seized on "up and down" because the musical tones put the thought in his mind, but the thought was not quite "up and down." The words were different; the meaning—

"Up and down in time," said Ban, breathlessly.

"Up and down," said the

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boy, with again that difference.

"And I fall down, only down."

"It's the only way you Change People ever move. So if you come here, you fall."

Because here there is no slope, only a precipice; a plunging gap into which all life and matter fell, changing and aging and falling apart and dying. Rock might survive unchanged and water and air and all the fundamental fabric of the universe, but metal would rust and fabric disintegrate and—all living things would die.

Ban's heart beat faster. No wonder men penetrating the fog never returned. No wonder armies and arms were useless. How hit a creature or how beat one who could evade you by moving in a direction you could not even conceive.

He could go back now and tell them there was no victory.

But could he go back?

They were holding him now, the boy and the girl, and under him was the black remorseless pit of eternity.

He said, "How do you move upward?"

"You just —— ——— —— — ———."

They went on and on but the chimes were chimes, not words. He lacked the ability to make meaningful concepts out of meaningless ones. As well, he thought bitterly, ask a fish how to breathe water or a tree how to live on sunlight.

"Teach me," he said earnestly, desperately. "Teach me."

Teach me to breathe water, fish, for I must or drown. Teach me to live on sunlight, tree, or I starve.

"I'm showing you. See, you are moving. See, up and down."

Ban held his breath, closed his eyes. Was there any sensation at all other than what he felt in the way of strength. Now he felt his muscles harden, then slacken. There was no movement, no feeling of up and down. He was simply standing on the beach; he could even hear the faint noise of the surf. There was only the change within, the physiological concomitants of old age coming and going. That was all.

He said, "Isn't there any way I can see better?" What good would seeing do?— He didn't care, seeing was man's chief sense. While the fog closed in, nothing could be clear.

"See?" asked the girl.

"See!" said the boy, changing the word too subtly for

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Ban to catch the nature of the change.

"You mean he's so used to the fog that—" began the girl.

"I want no fog," said Ban, with a sense of physical loathing at the very word. "I want it clear."

"But it *is* clear. *Your* people have the fog."

Ban fell silent. Here was a world in which all levels of time were commingled, in which people could move up and down—NO, he wondered if the words they were trying to say were "pasted" and "futured"—in such a world with up and down and past and future all commingled, surely all would be a fog to a man condemned to an eternal soft travel down a slope.

He pleaded, "Hold me. Hold me."

He had to work it out in case—in case he could get back. And on earth, with Time a mere slope that bound all creatures and all matter to a limited inexorable downward wash, it was fog to them, to the Cloud People.

Earth was a world in a universe of open space and bound time. Space is the strength of man, had said the Prophetess.

Had *she* known all this? he wondered suddenly. Had she understood? Then why had she not said so?

And did she know how to fight them, the Cloud People, as the Cloud People were fighting us?

His youngish heart leaped. But it was hard for them, too. It was for that reason that they, irresistable as they were, unfightable, undefeatable, didn't take over at once. The time-limited universe fought them and they advanced only slowly.

If men could only help the universe. If he could get back—

He said, "Teach me to fly in —in time."

The girl's voice said, "He means —— ——— —— ———."

The boy interrupted. "I know what he means, but how can I show him?"

"Show me," insisted Ban, desperately. "Show me."

"I *am* showing you. I'm up'n'downing you." (And behind the words, Ban could now hear a dim and simultaneous "past'n'futuring you.")

The girl said suddenly, "Lift him all the way up—Let's see what happens."

"No," screamed Ban.

He felt the lifting as though something, not air, not matter, but something, pressed against him with the speed of his passage. His cheeks were

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downy with unreaped fuzz and his legs were spindly. The pants came down over his shoes and then he seemed to shrink together.

He remembered his wings. He reached for the flight stud but it was gone and the wings themselves had fallen off his back a dull lump of reddish rock.

"No," he screamed in treble, and started to run across a fog-shrouded beach on short legs that entangled themselves in strands of raw wool that was turning to fleece. He fell and kicked chubbily, drooling and conscious of nothing more than a vague hunger. His lips moved in response, sucking—

Then his legs stretched out, and he rose tottering, unsteadily, to his feet. He was thin, about a foot less in height than he dimly realized he ought to be.

A voice said, and he recognized it all over again, as a girl's. "He changed. Did you see that? He changed."

"Of course." It was a boy's voice. "He's one of the Change People. What do you exepect. —He isn't as timevy as he was."

Timevy, thought Ban's boy-mind. Time-heavy.

He remembered. And he didn't remember, too. He remembered the past and his own future when he would grow up; no, when he had grown up. It was madly confusing. He was twelve years old. Just a moment ago, he had been on Mwyrland and Ilbur the Robot had told him stories out of his long, long memory of a time when men crowded the earth and built cities on power unthinkable—dim myths and legends coming out of the crowded mechanical consciousness of a deathless robot—

And then he had been twenty-two and then ninety-three and then fifty-one and then twenty-nine and then a half and then twelve again, in inextricable confusion.

Yet how could he understand it better now? It made more sense.

Even the fog—The fog!

It was still there, but thinner. He could make out a glimpse of flatness, of gleaming smooth evenness and of infinite gap and sparkle and, in the distance, moving patches of shininess. The Cloud People?

He turned to bend his glance at the two who were with him. They were shrouds still, but sparkling shrouds now.

The boy said, "He's - now. When we lifted him up high, he got ———."

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Ban almost caught that. The young were intimate with time. Time stands still for them and flows oddly, commingled and intermingled. It is only in maturity that the convention clamps down.

He had felt the movement through time just there at the end. He had felt something rushing past them.

"Teach me," he said, "teach me now how to move through time."

"Put out ——— ——— ——— ———," said the boy's chiming voice.

Ban tried. He *tried*. He tried to let his mind intuit if it could not understand. Almost he thought he had it. He put out something—something—

"No," said the boy. "Like this."

Ban felt something wrenching at him and something of him had moved. Nothing anywhere on his body. Something deep in his mind. It had moved and even fluttered.

"Now," said the boy. "I'll let you dow-ture-n easy."

Ban felt himself swelling and filling out, lift up and grow broad across his shoulder. The uniform was on him, fitting snugly, and the comfortable weight of furled wings was on his back.

The boy said, "No. You don't get the right ———. It's out, but you don't use it."

And a new voice interrupted. A deeper voice of chords that were incredibly beautiful. A mature voice, a subtle one.

"Younglings. It is long past time you were home. And you have been asked not to stray so near the fog banks."

The boy's chimes, thin and subdued, said, "Yes, Knower."

But the girl said, "We have one of the Change People."

"I know that, youngling. And you have been amusing yourself with him, which is not kind. And I see you have been trying to teach him to ——— also."

"It was wrong," said the boy, humble.

"Have you decided it was wrong?" said the Knower, without anger or reproof, merely questioning.

Ban cried, "Knower. Wait." But when he cried "Knower" he felt the thought shoot across the gap between himself and the Cloud People in a different form.

"You wish something?" There was a third shroud next to the two he had seen earlier, and it did not glitter. Even in the thinned fog, it did not glitter.

Ban had to bring his new knowledge to the City. He said,

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"Send me back, Knower. Let me return."

"Ought I?" The Knower said nothing more than that to him. The next words were addressed to the boy. "You are holding him."

"He's not very timevy," said the boy.

"I understand that. Let him go."

"But I'll fall," cried out Ban. "I'll die. Don't let go."

The third shroud clarified itself. A face, something very like a blank, formless face, came mistily into view. Something like blind, luminous ellipses formed themselves to gaze with infinite compassion down upon him.

"Let him go," said the Knower, and Ban knew that the boy must.

And he also knew the thought into which his word "Knower" had transmuted itself. He cried out, stranglingly, "Prophetess—Prophetess—Are *you* one of them?"

And the boy let go and, in his despair, Ban let himself fall, uncaring. The beach was under him, steady, motionless, but he fell and his aching muscles slackened.

And when the desire for life overwhelmed him, as it must to the end and he struck at his flight-stud to unfurl wings and race old age to the City, the rusted remnant came off in his trembling fingers and his cheeks fell in over disappearing teeth.

He struggled with fading fierceness against the end.

"Prophetess—" he wailed.

Part Three

By Robert Sheckley

DESPERATELY he fought time. Wisps of fog curled around him like pale headless snakes, and the sand far beneath his feet shifted and crept like an army of malignant ants. Ban winged through the fog bank, etern-

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ally falling, and saw his rifle barrel corrode and crumble to fine dust before his eyes. He flew, and a part of him watched with fascinated horror as ropelike blue veins corrugated his emaciated arms, and his head, unsupported by the wasted muscles of his neck, drooped on his chest.

"No man wins a race against time."

Who had spoken? Was it the Knower? Or had the prophetess shrieked into his ear. Whoever spoke the words, Ban knew they were true. Even before reaching the far edge of the fog bank, Ban knew himself as old, too old. He could feel the sluggish blood pounding in his brittle veins, could sense the threadlike beat of his heart threatening momentarily to stop.

He knew then that he would never live to reach his city. Even now he was dying, dying . . .

Uselessly.

With an old man's petulant anger he turned back. What had the Cloud People taught him? Could he remember it now, when memory had grown dim? Could he check his fall through the unplumbed depths of time?

Ban fought his way upward, swimming like a tired fish against the rushing river of time. He remembered concepts without words, he sensed his heaviness in time. A new direction seemed to open for him. He struggled toward it singlemindedly, and someone was singing a song without words. He fought for knowledge. Truly were his people called the Change People! For now Ban discarded everything he had learned, believed or felt before entering the fog banks that marked the furthest ramparts of time.

He attempted to lift himself in time.

In part, he succeeded.

He could feel the bone-wrenching jar as his body struck the sand. The blow would have shattered an old man's frame; but Ban was old no more.

Neither was he young.

He lay helpless on the sand, and realized that his stupendous effort had been based upon an incomplete knowledge of time's processes. He had held back death; but his present state was perhaps worse.

Stretched out on the sand was the heroic trunk and head of a middle-aged, yellow-bearded man. Beside him was his gun, the barrel deeply pitted, the wooden stock turned green and beginning to sprout. The hand that held the gun

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was a talon with brown-spotted parchment skin stretched tightly over frail bones. The other hand belonged by rights to a chubby boy of perhaps twelve. His legs could be judged at about four years old; but there from those small, fat legs hung a man's colossal feet.

Ban had learned the use of time—partially.

"Listen to me, Ban. Can you hear me?"

"I can hear you," Ban said, and realized that the Knower had spoken to him.

"You must become again what you were, Ban. You must fight again with time. You must ——— yourself."

"Impossible!"

"You must do it," Knower said. "For your own sake, and for the sake of all others. Because now we are all in deadly peril."

"I do not understand," Ban said.

"You still comprehend yourself only spatially. You must think temporally, as well. You must realize that you have stretched yourself to an immeasurable distance across time. How can I explain to you? Ban, your temporal elongation has created a flaw, a fault, a discontinuity in time. Now you are a ———."

"I still do not understand."

"Do you know what a fuse is?" Knower asked.

"Yes."

"You are a fuse. You are a connection. You are a conductor. A sea-wall holds back the ocean; you are a hole in the wall. A single tree on a barren plain attracts the lightning; you are a tree. Two elements may be stable until a link has been made between them; you are a link. Now do you understand why you must become as you were?"

"For whose good?" Ban asked.

"For the good of your people and mine," Knower said. "Ban, our people are not truly at war. Instead, we are both warred against. We push you because we ourselves are pushed, by the chaos that seeks to engulf the ordered universe. We must quarrel no longer. We must cooperate, your people and mine."

"How can I believe you?" Ban asked. And after a moment, he heard a cool, lucid voice behind him.

"What he tells you is true," the voice said, and Ban recognized it as that of the prophetess. "I myself tell you, Ban, you must become as you were. That is the first step."

Ban listened in an agony of indecision. Here in the thin mists, a man could be led to

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believe anything! Was this the prophetess speaking to him, or had the Knower adopted new form? What was happening, what was time going to do?

He decided. He fought to become as he had been. The heroic middle-aged trunk and head grew years younger; the parchment right hand started to fade, to take on size and strength. He fought to retain it, and suddenly his boy's legs grew three years younger. Desperately he aged his legs, and felt his arms grow thin and old. He made them young again, and felt his feet shrink hideously in his boots.

"It's impossible!" Ban screamed. "I can't do it all at the same time!"

"You must!" the prophetess told him.

"I need help!"

"No one can help you. Only you can do it. And Ban—there is very little duration left to do it in!"

Now Ban could hear a vast roaring in his ears. The sand beneath him seemed to mutter and shrink. He heard the Time children wail suddenly.

"Quick, Ban, quick!"

Staring wildly, Ban saw a strange entity before him, a creature of blind, luminous ellipses, beautiful, unhuman hands, a sparkling shroud. It was Knower. It was the prophetess. For a moment, Ban thought that they were standing side by side. Then he realized that he was staring at a single hermaphroditic entity, neither male nor female nor neuter, combining essences of all. Surely not human, yet perhaps benevolent. And Ban could not fathom the purpose of this Janus-natured creature, though he knew that purpose had to be there.

"Ban! For your own sake and for the sake of your people! *Become what you were!*"

Ban stared at the entity. Barren knowledge flooded his mind. Suddenly he understood the important yet ambiguous nature of the Time children, and what they would do to him, and he to them. Almost, he could understand the nature of the Knower-Prophetess.

"Ban!"

He blocked all thought from his mind. He made a massive effort, pitting all his strength and concentration against the baffling task before him. His hands became a man's, and his feet grew large again, his legs stretched. He ground his teeth together, concentrated . . .

Space and time recognize no differences, no difficulties, no

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separations. Near and far, past and present, are terms for men to use; but the forces of space and time are not contained in terms.

So, in another part of the galaxy, at another time and place, an event was taking place whose meaning was crucial to Ban and also to his people.

On a planet named by its inhabitants Hiallo, a small red crustacean dropped to the sandy ocean floor. Far from his burrow, he moodily contemplated the mysterious ways of love. He considered the reasons for his rejection by the brood-queen. He thought of his position in life, the honors he had attained, the chances he had missed. He wondered about the ocean of air far above him, distant, hidden.

He finished thinking. With one powerful claw he pinched off his head, thus committing the eight thousandth suicide for that year upon Hiallo.

His act was in no way remarkable. Rejection by the brood-queen was normally followed by suicide upon Hiallo. And yet, this one particular act was crucial to Ban and his people.

In another part of the galaxy, at another time and place, an event was taking place whose meaning was crucial to Ban and his people.

A biped named Marcellus, of a planet called Terra, sat beneath a huge oak tree. The sun was hidden, and the gloomy forest somewhere in Germania was chilly, so Marcellus pulled his woolen cloak tightly around him. He looked around and tried to figure out where he was. Everything looked the same in these damned woods; one tree looked like another tree, and all the avenues of the forest led in different and unknown directions.

Marcellus and ten others, under the command of a centurion, had marched out from the forward command post at Legae to check on the movements of the barbarians. They had penetrated half a day's march into the forest, had been about to turn back when the tall, pale-skinned man had fallen upon them. It had been a slaughter. At the end, Marcellus had fled; and now he was lost.

He was an unimportant man; and yet, it was very important that he get back. For he, a common foot soldier, had glimpsed a sight in the forest that might change the destiny of Rome itself.

Marcellus got to his feet, stifling a curse when he put

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weight on his slashed leg. He looked around at the identical corridors of the forest. From what direction had he come? He didn't know; but it was unlike a Roman to stay indecisive for long. Marcellus chose a direction and struck out, limping.

After half an hour's march, he stopped. There were faint sounds on either side of him, sounds that no bird or beast would make. Marcellus peered around him into the gloomy woods. It was almost night. He was very hungry, thirsty, and weaponless.

The whispering sounds came closer. Marcellus listened for a moment, then broke off a branch of a tree. Quickly he stripped it of twigs. A Roman soldier would die fighting, no matter what he had to fight against.

His only regret, as the whispering drew nearer, was that he would probably not live to tell the others of the strange and marvellous thing he had glimpsed in the woods of deep Germania.

Death in battle was a common fate for soldiers of the Roman Empire, and Marcellus himself was in no way a remarkable man. And yet, what he had seen in the dark German forest was crucial to Ban and his people.

In another part of the galaxy, at another time and place, an event was taking place whose meaning was crucial to Ban and his people.

On a planet whose discoverers called it 3Bcc, two explorers were having an argument. They were at present four-legged and two-handed. For the purposes of the argument, each had extruded a triple tongue. Enormously simplified, their argument went like this:

"It was your fault!"

"Yours!"

"You took the gravity readings wrong. You left out an entire decimal point. You gave me this misinformation, and in that way our ship was wrecked."

"I will admit that the dials did not read correctly. But *you* were landing the ship. You should have felt the gravity fault and corrected for it in spite of the readings."

"You shouldn't have trusted the dial. You should have *become* a dial."

"I was sleepy. Besides, if I had become a dial, who would have been on standby?"

The two explorers stared at each other. At last, good humor reasserted itself. They flowed into friendlier shapes and contemplated the planet upon which they had crashed.

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"It is a good land."

"A very good land."

"We will stay here, we will propagate, we will increase."

"And lose capability for our journey?"

"It is intended for journeys to have an end. And when the end is reached, the capabilities for journeying are no longer needed."

"That is true. This is a good land, and you have made a good answer. We will not be as we are . . . Still . . . Tell me, which of us will bear the children?"

"You will. After all, I piloted the ship."

"No, *you* will. For through me we came to this place, and the next task is yours."

The two explorers thought for a time. Then one said, "So important a decision cannot be argued. We must let another decide."

"That could de dangerous!"

"Not to us."

So they constructed a hermaphroditic machine to select fairly and randomly who would be the mother and who the father. And when that was done they turned with a good will to the land, and let the machine do as it desired, and where and when it desired.

The machine lived. With hideous self-awareness it knew itself and its destiny. Not even desire was spared the machine; not even a strange and absurd destiny connected inextricably with the act of a red crustacean creature, with the courage of a Roman soldier, and with the final decision of two explorers.

"The machine is dangerous," the female explorer said.

"Not to us," said the male explorer.

"Then to our children, or to their children."

"Would you have me destroy the machine?"

"No. Limit it, confine it, *dedicate* it!"

"Very well," the male explorer said.

The machine, which no longer directly perceived itself as a machine, accepted the limit and the dedication with good grace. It could not blame the explorers, for the machine recognized its own danger inherent in its qualities of randomness. The built-in limit almost took care of that; but made much more difficult the task to which it had been dedicated. Perhaps now the task would be impossible; but the explorers didn't care.

"Where is the machine?" the female explorer asked after a while.

"It has left us," the male explorer answered. "It has gone in order to do its work."

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"And it didn't even say goodbye," the female explorer said thoughtfully. "I wonder if that means anything . . ." But then she had to take care of her two children, and there was no more time to think of the machine.

And Ban, lying in the coiled sea-mists, was dimly aware of all this. A red crustacean, a Roman soldier, a hermaphroditic machine . . . He fought to become as he had been, struggled, cursed. Slowly, inexorably, he began to succeed. He was becoming Ban again . . .

And then he heard the despairing wail of Knower, the simultaneous shriek of the Prophetess. It was too late. The lightning had struck, the sea-wall had collapsed, the last fraction of the fuse had flared. Just before unconsciousness struck him, Ban could feel the forces of chaos engulfing him much as storm clouds engulf the sky.

Part Four

By Murray Leinster

HE DID not exactly return to consciousness. Later, it seemed to him that he had not really become unconscious, but that the things he saw and heard and felt were so completely preposterous that his mind rejected them. Because it appeared that chaos had engulfed the universe and that time and space and reality had ceased to be. On the whole, that was a reasonable assumption.

Neverthless he saw. He felt. He even heard. The hearing was a thin singing which did not form words at all, but muted wailings. The feeling was that the cosmos had turned askew, and the horizon had tilted so that what should have been the east was up, and what should have been the west was down—and he tended to fall toward it—and the beach was merely before him and the sky behind.

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The seeing was unexpressable distortion of the beach. He saw it, but in a manner he could never have explained to anyone. An artist's portrait of the beach and the waves would be something like it. But it would have to be a portrait, which differs from a photograph because a photograph is a picture of an instant and the sitter happens to be in it. But a portrait is of a person, and the moment is only a convention.

So Ban saw the beach, not as of this minute and second, but as a portrait shows a person. Somehow he saw it, all at once, shrouded in the fog that had come upon it since he was a boy, and also he saw it in bright sunshine. It was merely a pretense that he saw it between two breaths—at a given moment—because he could look inland and see smoke coming from the chimney of Ilbur the Robot, and he could see the beach empty as it was before there were either Cloud People or men. And he could see it as it would be aeons from now—.

No. What he could see changed, even as he looked. He saw it, after a fashion, as a man in flight, and thousands of feet high, would see a winding highway in all its turnings in the same seeing. A man on foot on the same highway would see only a few hundred yards before him, and only remember what was behind. Ban saw the beach in such a strange perspective. He saw the beach from that dimension which is time. But it changed. There was an ending, which drew nearer. It was not unlike a highway seen from far above, with a cloud-mass moving to blot it out. Ban saw an ending of the beach, in time. There was a thing which was like a wall in the direction he knew to be the future. Nothing existed beyond that wall. The beach came to an end. There was no time beyond the wall. It was the end of everything,—the solid world of men and the cloudy mist of the Cloud People alike. And the Cloud People wailed.

Ban could not actually see the wall because it was nothingness. Only nothingness could bring an end to time. And nothingness cannot be seen. Yet Ban knew it because it did not reflect the light that fell upon it, not yet absorb it. Nothingness cannot do either. It cannot do anything. If it could act it would not be nothingness, but something. Yet Ban knew that yonder real things ceased to be. Beyond that spot in time there was no time. There was a moment be-

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yond which there was no next second. And this was what had made the Knower and the Prophetess cry out in horror, because Ban had brought it about.

Back in the city of the tall towers and living people, folk were apprehensive, but they feared the Cloud People. They did not fear this. But here with the east overhead and the west underfoot Ban knew that the Cloud People wailed because they could perceive what men could not, save Ban.

But how could he know? What had happened to him? The Knower had said bewildering things, each one specific but all of them confusion. The Knower said that Ban had stretched himself across an immeasurable distance of time. He had made a short-circuit, a discontinuity, perhaps a hole or a puncture in time, rather, a gap in time and space together. While the different parts of his body were child and man and doddering ancient all at once, he had created a weakness in the fabric of the universe. And somewhere, somewhen, reality began to collapse. These things were the only possible explanation, but Ban found himself objecting. A thing cannot collapse unless by so doing it releases energy. A thing is not destroyed unless its destruction releases some tension. Yet it was old, old knowledge that the universe of suns and stars and matter—and of Cloud People and men—exists only because it is held in existence. It did not create itself, and it does not sustain itself. And in some strange fashion Ban's blind fumbling had broken one small spot in the fabric of being. It could be likened to a puncture. And it spread.

But why could he see through time as the Cloud People did? And why was the east now overhead and the beach before him and the west beneath his feet? He noticed, suddenly, the tugging which pulled at him. He tended to fall. Downward. Toward the west. He fought the fall automatically, struggling to sum up this experience to know what to do. But he did not incline to fall toward the beach, any more than a man beside the Needle or Alpha or the Arsenal would be drawn toward those vast structures. Down, to Ban, was westward.

Why? There had to be an explanation.

He struggled to grasp his situation to do battle with it. In his absorption he unconsciously lessened his conflict with the westward pull. He re-

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minded himself of a bird that had flown against a window in one of the City's towers. All windows and all outer doors were screened by force-fields like bubble-films, which allowed air to pass in or out gently, but resisted any fast-moving solid object or any strong wind. Sometimes a bird in full flight struck such a screen. Then the screen which was meant to act gently became violent. The bird was flung away, spinning and reeling and toppling helplessly. Sometimes the circuit-breaker clicked off and the bubble-field ceased to be unless someone restored the circuit. Yet one could reach a hand gently through the field, and the field ceased until the hand was removed. A man could walk through. But a running man would be flung back with violence.

That was it! Normally a man travelled slowly through the bubble-films which were instants of time. They let him pass slowly and gently through to the future, and age, and death. The boy and girl of the Cloud People had transported Ban through innumerable such films. Where the mists of the Cloud People hung, there was less impediment to time-movement than where clean sunshine shone upon the City. But when Ban became partly capable of time-motion, yet erratically; when Ban's legs were in one time-film and his body in another; when his body violated the laws of time and space, he shorted out the time-films as a hand through the bubble-screen destroys the screen until the hand is removed.

In effect, his body thus impossibly stretched through time acted as a man's body across an open screened doorway. It would destroy the screen; so that tornado-winds might roar through with nothing to stop them. And those tornado-winds would beat with terrific violence upon the man. He might be flung crazily away, like a bird trying to fly through a window.

This would explain everything. Partly instructed and partly capable of motion through time like the Cloud People, Ban had destroyed the time-films of unguessable centuries. And this caused the terror of the Knower and the Prophetess. Some part of him, some trivial part perhaps, remained remote from its proper place in time. There was a connection between it and now. There could be no time-films between while that connection lasted. So there could be no time. And through that gap

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came nothingness, to spread as a break in a soap-bubble spreads . . .

And Ban was beaten upon by the forces of the cosmos, trying to hold to what held it in being, like a force-bubble with a man lying across a door while a tornado raged. He was flung crazily about like a bird which has tried to pierce a window's bubble-field. He moved in no normal direction; he had no secure link either to space or time, and therefore the east was up and the west was down—but where was the past and future?—and the sky was behind him and the beach before. At least that was so.

But the beach was not before him! There was water, rippling like a vertical wall. There was stone. He looked ahead and saw down upon the rocky pinnacles of that small island halfway between Mwyrland and the City. There was no mist upon it now. He had forgotten to resist the pull upon him, and he fell, but not toward ancientness and death, nor toward the ground or sea, nor even skyward.

He fell toward the west. He gazed downward and saw that his motion was a retracing of the path he had flown, from the Oracles to Mwyrland. He fell headlong.

And then he noticed his body. It had changed again. He was a gangling boy of fifteen. He cried out angrily, and his voice broke. It was partly treble and partly the discordant croak of early adolescence, and then Ban realized what the tugging at him was, and what was its consequence. He was not only in a new relationship to the things of space, but of time. He no longer had an inherent tendency to fall toward the future and increasing age. Now he fell toward infancy. And the direction of infancy was the west.

He checked his fall by a terrific exercise of will, to look at his hands. They were not thin as a youth's hands are. They tended toward chubbiness like the hands of a child. The first phalange of each finger was rounded. His finger-joints were smooth.

It was exhausting to hold himself still, and not to fall toward the west. The pull was not as strong as it had been at first. He was a boy now, and the Cloud People children had said of him as a child that he was not as timevy—as time-heavy—as an old man. But as a boy he had not the strength of manhood. Yet now it was a man's mind that demanded the impossible of a child's body.

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And that man's mind despaired, while still he fought the pull of time toward infancy, which lay to the west. He needed help. He needed knowledge. He raised his face toward the beach and cried out shrilly for the Cloud People to come and help him, however great their desperation.

Again there was a change. He still saw the beach as from time, but the distance through which he could look futureward had dwindled. The wall-which - was - not - a - wall was nearer. The end of existing things was closer. As a standing forest grows small while a forest fire rages across it, time-to-come grew less as nothingness swallowed it. Yet nothingness cannot swallow anything. The beach and the sky and the sea were not devoured, but bit by bit they ceased to act; to reflect light or absorb it, to pull together or push apart, to move or to resist motion.

They ceased to be real. They became one with all those things which are merely possible and are not actual. There remained, in theory, a link to actuality in that they could exist if they could affect each other, if they could do anything, if they could perform any action of any sort. But for a thing to operate there must be time. Time is the arrangement by which things are able to happen. Without time nothing can occur. And there must be space. Space is the arrangement by which things can consist of parts which are side by side. But time and space were broken and breaking together like a punctured bubble, and the universe grew smaller.

There was no longer a cloud-bank over Mwyrland. Ban had gone back to a time in his childhood before the Cloud People formed their mist over Mwyrland and slowly, slowly, slowly deepened it until ageing men and women fled their homes and the war with the Cloud People began. But though Ban went back toward days long past, he still could see the vast encroachment of nothingness upon all things that were.

He knew very bitterly that he had brought the catastrophe about. He'd not intended it, to be sure. He hadn't done it alone, even, two Cloud-Children really began it, and the Knower was aware and thought their behavior only unkind. There had been no awareness that there was danger in the playful investigation, by Cloud-Children, of the nature of mere man. Yet the Cloud-People could travel back

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and forth in time from past to future. They could see the future. Then there had been a future, but now it grew less and less, so that there must be some dimension beyond the three of space and the fourth of time in which alterations of those four could come about. And of this dimension neither the Knower nor the Prophetess had any inkling. So there was a limit to prophecy.

And now he understood his present estate and the topsy-turviness of up and down and past and future. The universe attempted to use him—who had begun it—to bring an end to its destruction. The cosmos strove to heal itself. Had Ban died on the beach as an incredibly aged and futile dodderer, the sun would not shine on Mwyrland, to be sure, but it would still shine on the City, for a while. Had Ban not extended himself through time, there would not now be a gap blocked by his still-displaced body in which time could not exist as bubble-films which make the endless succession of seconds and minutes and hours and years. If Ban could restore himself to what he had been—withdrawing every atom of himself from any other time but the present—the crack in the cosmos would heal itself, like a force-bubble across a door or window. But it was impossible. He could not do it. There was only one thing he could do, which would have the same effect. He could repair the fabric of reality by not ever having been.

It was this that he must consent to, in yielding to the westward tugging. His body was fourteen years old, now. Perhaps thirteen. To him, childhood lay to the west and maturity to the east. He was drawn backward through a displaced time toward infancy. This tugging, this pull, was the result of the laws of existence, because existence could not continue while his body contravened the laws of existence. If he let himself fall past ten years of age, and six, and two, and infancy itself . . . If he let himself fall back into the time before he was, then there would no longer be a break in the unity of time and space. He who had never been could not create a flaw. His body which had never existed could not short-circuit time. There could not be a break where he had never existed to make it.

Ban raged. It is not too bad a thing to die. All men face it sooner or later, and there is a secret knowledge which comes

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to every man at such moments. The knowledge is that it is not the end. But Ban was required to make a greater sacrifice than death. It was demanded of him that he surrender ever having been. He was required to embrace extinction.

He raged. But he was the Warden's son, and the City must be defended. He could not survive, but he could make extinction count. With somehow an air of scorn, he let himself fall. And it was dramatic, as he fell, to remember bitterly such unrelated things as a girl who shyly gave him a bowl of milk in the home of Ilbur the Robot, and Urmuz scolding him respectfully for some unrecalled fault, and the Prophetess with the strong hands and strangely indefinite face beneath her hood, and the girl who was to be her successor, who denied that she had a name and yet looked wistfully at Ban when he was in the prime of his strength and arrogance.

He remembered innumerable things, and now not one of them would ever have been real. Because he would never have been, and Urmuz would not teach him soldier-craft, nor his companions ever sing or drink with him, nor his father try to hide his pride in a swaggering son who would be Warden after him.

These things would be worse than forgotten. They would never be thought of. They would go into that limbo of possible things from which so few ever emerge to become actual. When Ban had never been born — why — things would start fresh. Perhaps his father would have another son, whom Urmuz would guide and scoldingly cherish. His friends would not miss him. How could they miss someone who never was? Perhaps they would choose another in his place, not knowing that it was a place that could have been filled otherwise. The girl at the Oracles would not think of him. How could she? She would think wistfully of someone else entirely. The Prophetess would not guide him, nor the Cloud-People children.

Then Ban revolted. In midair, he abruptly fought his own descent to infancy. His mind was still a man's mind, in a body perhaps four years old. The disparity, in fact, was very probably the reason for the disaster to all things. But he was required to make a greater sacrifice than any other man was ever asked to make. And it was not a reasonable bargain. He would ac-

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complish nothing worth the sacrifice if he ceased to exist.

He fought the pull that dragged at him. He ceased to fall. Above him was the east and below the west and behind him there was the sky and before him the very shore-line of the Gulf of Orea. But he would not fall farther. He would not! Because there was no reward for his falling.

His non-existence would not keep the Cloud-People from forming the thinnest of mists above Mwyrland, in which people aged overnight, when the mist was thin, and then between sunrise and even-fall, when it grew thicker, and then in fractions of an hour when the cloud was at its densest.

If he were not ever born, the army of the City would still sally forth valiantly to do battle with the Cloud-People, and never return. The mist over Mwyrland would spread slowly out over the water, and cover the rocky volcanic island halfway to shore, and move forward to the City.

If he were never to exist, still someone—not he, but someone—would desperately demand counsel of the Prophetess on how the Cloud-People could be vanquished, and she would send him to Mwyrland as she'd sent Ban, alone. And he would die and ultimately the towers of the City would be filled with mist. Then the Cloud-People with their singing voices would drift about the wetted structures and only a few men would remain out on the Heath, forgetting that men had ever built cities or flown among the clouds.

These things would happen despite his sacrifice. But Ban had ventured greatly in defense of the City, because he was the Warden's son and it was his obligation. He was still the Warden's son, and it was still his obligation to defend the City. This sacrifice would do no good to the race of men. He would not sacrifice himself to extend the dank domain of the Cloud-People! He would not!

He cursed, and wept with rage because his curses were in a shrill treble voice, and he was a small and naked child in whom a man's mind inexplicably functioned, and because he stood alone against time and space and destiny and there was no one to help him in what he must accomplish. Must!

"I won't do it!" he cried in his child's high voice to the world and the sky and the sea about him. "I won't do it!" he cried fiercely to the galaxy. "You can't make me!" he

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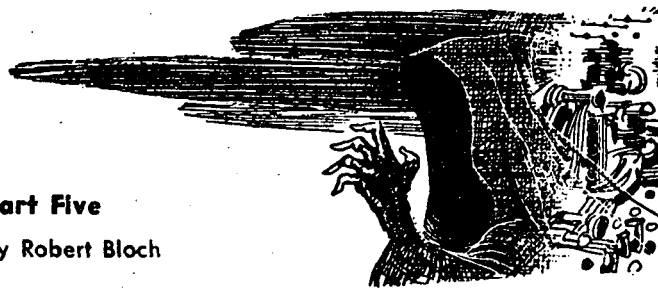
cried to the universe itself. "Unless you make it save the City I won't do it!" he cried to all creation. But oddly enough he thought of a girl in the Oracles, who had looked wistfully at him when he was a tall, virile young man.

There was no reply. He clenched his child's fists and pipingly defied all time and space and destiny:

"I won't!—won't! won't! —won't!"



Part Five

By Robert Bloch

THE warp was widening. Time and Space had lost coalescence in a disintegrating cosmos. The Prophetess had predicted, the Knower suspected, but only one man had full knowledge, full realization. And shrilled his ultimate defiance against the ultimate extinction of all things—Ban, in his child's body, tangled in the loosening web of Time and Space, keening, "I won't, I won't, I won't!"

Only one man, and he helpless.

One man—and one *other*.

It was not man, nor beast; neither male nor female, but both and more than both. The machine which had been created on 3Bcc and vanished, was dedicated to a mission. And that mission involved neither instinct nor emotion. It was the pure, objective goal of cosmic survival.

Unfettered by tri- or quadridimensional laws of Time and Space, it moved freely through the universe as a random entity. All choice was its portion, all sentience and sensation was there to sample. But the machine was seeking the focal point, the focal point of weakness wherein it must function.

And its initial data was limited.

Perceptivity came slowly. First came the knowledge of weakness—a learned acquisi-

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tion, for the machine had no initial referents. Then came the dimly-intuited associations.

The cosmos was a maze. Somewhere in the maze there was a flaw, threatening the entire structure. *Problem:* find a way *through* the maze *to* the flaw. *Clue:* personify awareness of distress.

On these vague premises the dedicated entity acted, and localized isolated instances; computing and discarding on the basis of intensity, probing for full comprehension.

Two images emerged, two clues to aid in the search. The machine established them as voices.

"I won't, I won't, I won't!"

First the voice was an interior echo. The machine sought to personify it. The only data which came through was ambiguous enough, and in the form of a single, simple impression—*redhead.*

Redhead.

Where in the universe was the redhead in distress? Another mechanism moved into full operation—and the machine found itself foundering upon the sandy ocean floor of the planet Hiallo, contemplating the red head of a crustacean which rested there, snapped clean from the lifeless body.

The cry had not come from here.

And yet it echoed, was still echoing, for in the Oracles the nameles neophyte who loved Ban could hear his call; she pressed her hands to her head, tangling her fingers in the red locks as his cry came to her. *"I won't, I won't, I won't!"*

The machine sensed her presence now, but simultaneously a stronger image came —not the echo-emanation but the source of the call itself.

A yellow-haired man.

The machine blurred and left the ocean bed of Hiallo. It was on Terra now, in Germania's tangled forest, perceiving the battle. Perceiving, and perceived. For yellow-haired Marcellus glimpsed it.

Marcellus—was this the entity the machine sought? It sensed no danger to the cosmos here, only individual destruction, and yet it could not be sure. There was more data to be gleaned. It followed Marcellus, waited for him in the wood. And it assumed substance and beckoned Marcellus with a whisper. Marcellus awaited it, armed with a puny branch.

The machine probed. Here was fear and courage, commingled in defiance. Marcellus did not want to die, but his

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thought was wholly self-centered. It was his danger and his alone which prompted him. And *"I won't, I won't I won't!"* had not emanated from this yellow-haired biped.

So this was not the area of threat.

The machine moved from Terra, probing again. The keening cry existed. The keening crier existed. Existed in an area of almost non-existence.

Images and impressions multiplied. A fog, and a singing. A hairy, ugly man pacing the entrance to a tall edifice. A cold-eyed female in prayer. A moist-eyed female *(redhead? yes!)* in supplicating agony. An amorphous presence, a Knower, drained of all but dread.

All of them caught, caught in the maze. And the maze itself disintegrating. Yes, the cosmic threat was here, in this area. In this *non-area.* For that was what it was becoming, as Time and Space twisted and tore, and only one faint voice defied eternal termination with *"I won't, I won't, I won't!"*

The voice of a *yellow-haired* biped.

On land?

On sea?

In the air?

The machine probed. Probed land that was scarcely land, as Space sundered. Searched a sea that was now sky and mist and fog commingled. Roamed air that was truly empty—empty of all dimensional interrelationship.

The machine sought the source of the sole remaining strength; the awareness of extinction which still rebelled against the knowledge of its own ending.

And it came to Ban; came to the ridiculous child-body twisting and turning in a loosening Limbo where north, south, east, west, down, up, forward and back whirled free of all relationships.

The machine sensed the problem and the solution. It communicated with Ban using neither word nor image, merely direction in the form of reinforcing Ban's own survival-urge.

Suddenly Ban felt the strength surge back to implement his defiance. He began to move, to grow. He would become *himself* once more. And give *himself* up to the gap, to heal the breach between Time and Space. When he was properly timevy, he would be fixed in the balancing-area, forever, so that the universe could stabilize.

There was no right, no

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wrong, no alternative at all to consider. This was his purpose, his function. Where the new-found resolution came from was not even a question; nor was the source of his sudden power to act.

He became Ban.

And being Ban, he had only to remain fixed, forever fixed in this Limbo beyond Space and Time, so that the balances he had disturbed would be restored.

It meant an end to living, an end to consciousness, and end to self-awareness. But it was meaningful sacrifice, and worthy of the son of a Warden. Even if he would no longer know himself to be the son of a Warden. Even if he would no longer retain consciousness of squat Urmuz or the beautiful nameless one who waited (would wait forever, now, and in vain) inside the Oracles.

Ban *was* the sacrifice, his was the dedication. He felt consciousness spin away. For a moment there was a physical twinge of regret, but then the physical awareness left him, and the regret was purely psychic. He would cease to be, and that was right; yet he had lost the final battle. For in the end, this wouldn't alter the inexorable course of events. The cosmos would persist, but for how long? Only until the Cloud-People invaded his city and the Heaths beyond. Then the extinction would proceed until all was engulfed in nothingness. For Time would devour Space.

So it was a delaying-action, at best, this sacrifice he was making. But it must be done. He must surrender himself, lose himself in the whirling, for he was dedicated—

Dedicated.

The machine observed, registered. Something was wrong. *Ban* was not dedicated. Dedication was the machine's function.

Ban must not usurp its place.

The machine could heal. And it must communicate, quickly, establish a relationship with Ban before he was irrevocably lost in the elemental Limbo.

"Ban—come back!"

Then the directive came, implemented by action. The machine lifted, grasped, transported.

Ban awoke to blinking awareness, standing upon the terrace beside the black bulk of the Oracles. He felt the firmness beneath his feet, sensed his proper physical-temporal relationship with Alpha, The Needle, the distant Arsenal.

He was *himself* again.

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But for how long?

Something had snatched him from the jaws of sacrifice. But the jaws still gaped. Far away was the sea and the mist. Beyond that the Cloud-People hovered. Hovered closer and closer. Nothing had changed.

Nothing had changed, *because he had failed.*

Urmuz emerged from the shadows, breathless.

"You left me behind, sir—I was looking everywhere—" His face worked. "She told me—"

The girl with the great gray eyes stirred in the shadows behind the burly man.

Ban faced them, nodding slowly. "Yes, I went alone." He shrugged. "And to no avail. There is no way to conquer the strength of the Cloud-People. Man cannot conquer Time."

"But I don't understand, sir—tell us what happened—"

Urmuz stared at Ban helplessly. Then his eyes fell. "I suppose it's no use talking."

Ban nodded. "No use talking," he echoed. "The end will come soon."

The girl stepped forward. She walked proudly, bearing a gift in her great gray eyes. Ban saw it there, and found the exultation of ecstasy even in despair. His hands went out to claim the gift, and she was in his arms, her hair enveloping his shoulders in a red caress. *So we die,* Ban told himself. *But first, even for a moment, we live—*

"Hold!"

The voice that was not a voice came from the face that was not a face.

Ban stepped back, releasing the girl. She turned to stare, as he and Urmuz stared, at the apparition of the Prophetess.

"I heard," she said.

Ban squared his shoulders. "Then what does it matter?" he countered. "You know time has run out for all of us. Let the girl be. Give us the last few moments that remain."

"Captain Ban." The beautiful accents were measured. "You spoke of failure. Of this you need not be ashamed, for I am aware that you fought hard, even to the point of giving up the ultimate essence of identity."

"I tried," Ban murmured. "I failed."

"To fail is one thing. To surrender, another." The tones were even. "You are a soldier. Even now, with the battle lost, you cannot capitulate. You cannot flee, as you seek to flee, into the oblivion of momentary sensation. This girl is dedicated to the Cove-

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nant of the Oracles, just as you are dedicated to Wardenship of this City."

"I cannot stop the Cloud-People," Ban replied. "Time is too strong."

Urmuz stirred restlessly. "What do you want us to do?" he grumbled.

The Prophetess faced him. Something in her face—or what radiated from it and obscured it—caused the squat man to bow his head.

"I—I meant no disrespect, Prophetess," he muttered. "But the Captain's right. We are finished. What can we do now?"

"We can function as we were meant to function. We can observe the enemy. Watch and wait." A beautiful hand rose and beckoned. "Come with me."

Together they moved into the many-vaulted vastness of the Oracles. Together they sank down before the table as the Prophetess took her place behind it and bowed her head. For a moment, silence. The long, meaningful silence which is a prelude to extinction.

Almost Ban could see the clouds gathering and moving towards them; the Cloud-People were swirling before the sea and city, as Time moved forward to devour Space. Almost Ban could sense the death of the world as he knew it.

And then he *could* see, *could* sense.

For a cloud was with them now; the Prophetess, Urmuz, the girl could see it, too. It hovered in the vaulted archways above, and it emanated from the lovely hands upon the table-top.

The Prophetess had conjured up the final vision . . .

Once again Ban gazed upon the desolate shores where the shimmering clouds hovered. He thought he recognized the shape he had come to think of as the Knower, but he could not be sure. For there were thousands of shapes; thousands upon thousands of swirling semi-solid shadows, lambent and yet unillumined, obtuse and opaque. They were not merely hovering, they were converging now—converging upon a common goal.

It might have been a machine there in the sky, but it was not an artifact Ban recognized. It might have been a gigantic ship, designed to transport those who had not mastered flight by wing. It might have been a living entity, functioning to attract the Cloud-People.

Ban and the others did not

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know. But they could perceive what it was doing—incredibly, inexorably, it lured the cloud-shapes to its side. And a myriad whirring slits opened and engulfed them. The cloud-shapes disappeared, incorporated into the shining, shimmering sphere. The object was now a gigantic, blinding blur, and Ban could not look upon it, even in prophetic image.

He wrenched his eyes away, stared down at the Prophetess, seeking to fathom her face.

And now, suddenly, her *face* was a blinding blur, mirroring the machine.

The non-voice spoke.

"Fear not. Time is conquered. The Cloud-People, as you know them, are willing to depart. For they know that there is no future for them here. Their Time can devour our Space, but by the very nature of the act, the cosmos will be destroyed. I have told them so, and they have agreed that their place is in a cosmos of their own. I shall transport them there. That is my purpose, the function to which I am dedicated."

"But—who are you?"

"An instrument. An instrument serving one purpose—survival. I have served here in many ways. As Knower of the Cloud-People. As Prophetess, to your humanity. Now my service here is ended."

Ban glanced upwards and away. The gigantic vision was fading—and within it, the gigantic machine was blurring, too—

He tore his eyes from the incredible and searched the features of the Prophetess. *The features that were fading now as the machine faded.*

The lovely, lulling voice was fainter, too. But Ban could still hear it as it spoke.

"You thought you had failed, Captain Ban. But you did not fail. My mission was to save the cosmos, but I could not function until I found the focal point. And that focal point was in your strength, your human defiance of all destiny. It was your voice, crying, *"I won't, I won't, I won't!"* that guided me, brought me here. I go now, forever from your cosmos and your consciousness. But there is no need for me any longer. The Covenant is ended. I leave you with all you require to survive—your humanity, which is your strength."

The voice blurred, the vision blurred, the Prophetess blurred.

And then there were only the three of them—the squat,

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shaken man, the quiet, trembling girl, and the yellow-haired warrior in an empty, vaulted chamber.

"I don't understand," said Urmuz.

"I do," murmured the girl.

"I'll try," said Ban.

Together, the three of them walked back into the garden.

The sun was shining, as far as the eye could see.

"Dream?" muttered Urmuz.

"Reality," the girl affirmed.

"Perhaps both," Ban nodded. He paused. "If, somewhere, sometime, someone perfected a mechanism dedicated to saving the universe—and if it directed itself to us—"

"Foolishness!" Urmuz was scowling.

"But the Cloud-People are gone. We're safe. You know that, don't you?" the girl persisted.

"Yes. And I'm going to do something sensible about it—in the nearest tavern." Urmuz turned. "Coming, sir?"

Ban shook his head, moving closer to the girl.

Urmuz shrugged and moved down the dappled sunlight of the path.

For a moment Ban stared down into the great gray eyes—so cool a contrast to the red radiance of the haloing hair.

"You heard what she—it—said," he whispered. "The Covenant is ended."

She nodded gravely.

"That means there is no need for the Oracles. The future need not be foreseen; it is in our hands."

His hands reached for hers and she did not draw away.

"You are now destined to be a prophetess. You are a woman now."

Again she nodded. "And mine to claim."

She gave him her lips willingly enough, but Ban sensed no surrender. And when she was at last free to speak, her voice was firm. "Claim," she echoed. "But not to conquer. For I *am* a woman, as you are a man, and that is a struggle which never ends."

"You're joking," said Ban, with all the instinctual arrogance of the commander and future Warden.

"Perhaps," said the girl.

"Be serious for a moment, my darling. Remember, it is permitted now—tell me your name."

Slowly she raised her great gray eyes to his, and in them he read the forecast of his future.

"Your name," he commanded.

"Time," she said.

THE END

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Glibly we talk of racial memory, the womb of the ocean mother, the trace of salt in our blood stream. How terrifying they become in the light of . . .

the SHERRINGTON THEORY

By J. G. BALLARD

Illustrated by BLAIR

THEY remind me of the Gadarene swine," Mildred Pelham remarked.

Interrupting his scrutiny of the crowded beach below the cafeteria terrace, Roger Pelham glanced at his wife. "Why do you say that?"

Mildred continued to read for a few moments, and then lowered her book. "Well, don't they?" she asked rhetorically. "They look like pigs."

Pelham smiled weakly at this mild but characteristic display of misanthropy. He peered down at his own white knees protruding from his shorts and at his wife's oiled arms and shoulders. "I suppose we all do," he temporized. However, there was little chance of Mildred's remark being overheard and resented. They were sitting at a corner table, with their backs to the hundreds of ice-cream eaters and cola-drinkers crammed elbow to elbow on the terrace. The dull hubbub of voices was overlayed by the endless commentaries broadcast over the transistor radios propped among the bottles, and by the distant sounds of the fairground behind the dunes.

A short drop below the terrace was the beach, covered by a solid mass of reclining figures which stretched from the water's edge up to the roadway behind the cafeteria and then away over the dunes. Not a single grain of sand was visible. Even at the tide-line, where a little slack water swilled weakly at a debris of old cigarette packets and other trash, a huddle of small children clung to the skirt of the beach, hiding the grey sand.

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GAZING down at the beach again, Pelham realized that his wife's ungenerous judgment was no more than the truth. Everywhere bare haunches and shoulders jutted into the air, limbs lay in serpentine coils. Despite the sunlight and the considerable period of time they had spent on the beach, many of the people were still white-skinned, or at most a boiled pink, restlessly shifting in their little holes in a hopeless attempt to be comfortable.

Usually this spectacle of jostling, over-exposed flesh, with its unsavory bouquet of stale suntan lotion and sweat—looking along the beach as it swept out to the distant cape, Pelham could almost see the festering corona, sustained in the air by the babble of ten thousand transistor radios, reverberating like a swarm of flies—would have sent him hurtling along the first inland highway at seventy miles an hour. But for some reason Pelham's usual private distaste for the general public had evaporated. He felt strangely exhilarated by the presence of so many people (he had calculated that he could see over 50 thousand along the five-mile stretch of beach) and found himself unable to leave the terrace, although it was now 3 o'clock and neither he nor Mildred had eaten since breakfast. Once their corner seats were surrendered they would never regain them.

To himself he mused: 'The ice-cream eaters on Echo beach. . . .' He played with the empty glass in front of him. Shreds of synthetic orange pulp clung to the sides, and a fly buzzed half-heartedly from one to another. The sea was flat and calm, an opaque grey disc, but a mile away a low surface mist lay over the water like vapor on a vat.

"You look hot, Roger. Why don't you go in for a swim?"

"I may. You know, it's a curious thing, but of all the people here, not one is swimming."

MILDRED nodded in a bored way. A large passive woman, she seemed content merely to sit in the sunlight and read. Yet it was she who had first suggested that they drive out to the coast, and for once had suppressed her usual grumbles when they ran into the first heavy traffic jams and were forced to abandon the car and complete the remaining two miles on foot. Pelham had not seen her walk like that for ten years, impelled towards the sea like a lemming.

"It is rather strange," she said. "But it's not particularly warm."

"I don't agree." Pelham was about to continue when he suddenly stood up and looked over the rail at the beach. Half-way

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down the slope, parallel with the promenade, a continuous stream of people moved slowly along an informal right-of-way, shouldering past each other with fresh bottles of cola, lotion and ice-cream.

"Roger, what's the matter?"

"Nothing. . . . I thought I saw Sherrington." Pelham searched the beach, the moment of recognition lost.

"You're always seeing Sherrington. That's the fourth time alone this afternoon. Do stop worrying."

"I'm not worrying. I can't be certain, but I felt I saw him then."

Reluctantly, Pelham sat down, edging his chair fractionally closer to the rail. Despite his mood of lethargy and vacuous boredom, an undefinable but distinct feeling of restlessness had preoccupied him all day. In some way associated with Sherrington's presence on the beach, this uneasiness had been increasing steadily. The chances of Sherrington—with whom he shared an office in the Physiology Department at the University—actually choosing this section of the beach were remote, and Pelham was not even sure why he was so convinced that Sherrington was there at all. Perhaps these illusory glimpses—all the more unlikely in view of Sherrington's black beard and high severe face, his stooped long-legged walk—were simply projections of this underlying tension and his own peculiar dependence upon Sherrington.

HOWEVER, this sense of uneasiness was not confined to himself. Although Mildred seemed immune, most of the people on the beach appeared to share this mood with Pelham. As the day progressed the continuous hubbub gave way to more sporadic chatter. Occasionally the noise would fall away altogether, and the great concourse, like an immense crowd waiting for the long-delayed start of some public spectacle, would sit up and stir impatiently. It was a group reaction, consistent and predictable, as if all were motivated by the same stimulus. To Pelham, watching carefully from his vantage point over the beach, these ripples of restless activity, as everyone swayed forward in long undulations, were plainly indicated by the metallic glimmer of the thousands of portable radios moving in an oscillating wave. Pelham also couldn't help but note that each successive spasm, recurring at roughly half-hour intervals, seemed to take the crowd slightly nearer the sea.

Directly below the concrete edge of the terrace, among the mass of reclining figures, a large family group had formed a pri-

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vate enclosure. To one side of this, literally within reach of Pelham, the adolescent members of the family had dug their own nest, their sprawling angular bodies, in their damp abbreviated swimming suits, entwined in and out on each other like some curious annular animal. Well within earshot, despite the continuous back ground of noise from the beach and the distant fair-grounds, Pelham listened to their inane talk, following the thread of the radio commentaries as they switched aimlessly from one station to the next.

"They're about to launch another satellite," he told Mildred. *"Echo XXII."*

"Why do they bother?" Mildred's flat blue eyes surveyed the distant haze over the water. "I should have thought there were more than enough of them flying about already."

"Well . . ." For a moment Pelham debated whether to pursue the meager conversational possibilities of his wife's reply. Although she was married to a lecturer in the School of Physiology, her interest in scientific matters was limited to little more than a blanket condemnation of the entire sphere of activity. His own post at the University she regarded with painful tolerance, despising the untidy office, scruffy students and meaningless laboratory equipment. Pelham had never been able to discover exactly what calling she would have respected. Before their marriage she maintained what he later realized was a polite silence on the subject of his work; after eleven years this attitude had barely changed, although the exigencies of living on his meagre salary had forced her to take an interest in the subtle, complex and infinitely wearying game of promotional snakes and ladders.

AS expected, her acerbic tongue had made them few friends, but by a curious paradox Pelham felt that he had benefitted from the grudging respect this had brought her. Sometimes her waspish comments, delivered at the overlong sherry parties, always in a loud voice during some conversational silence (for example, she had described the elderly occupant of the Physiology chair as 'that gerontological freak' within some five feet of the Professor's wife) delighted Pelham by their mordant accuracy, but in general there was something frightening about her pitiless lack of sympathy for the rest of the human race. Her large bland face, with its prim, rosebud mouth, reminded Pelham of the description of the Mona Lisa as looking as if she had just dined off her husband. Mildred, however, did not even smile.

"Sherrington has a rather in-

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teresting theory about the satellites," Pelham told her. "I'd hoped we might see him so that he could explain it again. I think you'd be amused to hear it, Mildred. He's working on IRM's at present—"

"On what?" The group of people behind them had turned up the volume of their radio and the commentary, of the final countdown at Cape Canaveral, boomed into the air over their heads.

Pelham said: "IRM's—innate releasing mechanisms. I've described them to you before, they're inherited reflexes—" He stopped, watching his wife impatiently.

Mildred had turned on him the dead stare with which she surveyed the remainder of the people on the beach. Testily Pelham snapped: "Mildred, I'm trying to explain Sherrington's theory about the satellites!"

Undeterred, Mildred shook her head. "Roger, it's too noisy here, I can't possibly listen. And to Sherrington's theories less than to anyone else's."

ALMOST imperceptibly, another wave of restless activity was sweeping along the beach. Perhaps in response to the final digital climax of the commentators at Cape Canaveral, people were sitting up and dusting the coarse sand from each other's backs. Pelham watched the sunlight flickering off the chromium radio sets and diamante sunglasses as the entire beach swayed and surged. The noise had fallen appreciably, letting through the sound of the wurlitzer at the fun-fair. Everywhere there was the same expectant stirring. To Pelham, his eyes half-closed in the glare, the beach seemed like an immense pit of seething white snakes.

Somewhere, a woman's voice shouted. Pelham sat forward, searching the rows of faces masked by sunglasses. There was a sharp edge to the air, an unpleasant and almost sinister implication of violence hidden below the orderly surface.

Gradually, however, the activity subsided. The great throng relaxed and reclined again. Greasily, the water lapped at the supine feet of the people lying by the edge of the sea. Propelled by one of the off-shore swells, a little slack air moved over the beach, carrying with it the sweet odor of sweat and sun-tan lotion. Averting his face, Pelham felt a spasm of nausea contract his gullet. Without doubt, he reflected, homo sapiens en masse presented a more unsavory spectacle than almost any other species of animal. A corral of horses or steers conveyed an impression of powerful nervous grace, but this mass of articulated albino flesh sprawled on the beach resembled

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the diseased anatomical fantasy of a surrealist painter. Why had all these people congregated there? The weather reports that morning had not been especially propitious. Most of the announcements were devoted to the news of the imminent satellite launching, the last stage of the world-wide communications network which would now provide every square foot of the globe with a straight-line visual contact with one or other of the score of satellites in orbit. Perhaps the final sealing of this now inescapable aerial canopy had prompted everyone to seek out the nearest beach and perform a symbolic act of self-exposure as a last gesture of surrender.

UNEASILY, Pelham moved about in his chair, suddenly aware of the edge of the metal table cutting into his elbows. The cheap slatted seat was painfully uncomfortable, and his whole body seemed enclosed in an iron maiden of spikes and clamps. Again a curious premonition of some appalling act of violence stirred through his mind, and he looked up at the sky, almost expecting an airliner to plunge from the distant haze and disintegrate on the crowded beach in front of him.

To Mildred he remarked: "It's remarkable how popular sunbathing can become. It was a major social problem in Australia before the second World War."

Mildred's eyes flickered upwards from her book. "There was probably nothing else to do."

"That's just the point. As long as people are prepared to spend their entire time sprawled on a beach there's little hope of ever building up any other pastimes. Sunbathing is anti-social because it's an entirely passive pursuit. He dropped his voice when he noticed the people sitting around him glancing over their shoulders, ears drawn to his high precise diction. "On the other hand, it does bring people together. In the nude, or the near-nude, the shop-girl and the duchess are virtually indistinguishable."

"*Are* they?"

Pelham shrugged. "You know what I mean. But I think the psychological role of the beach is much more interesting. It probably represents a return to the archaeopsychic past, a sort of neuronic equivalent of the racial birthplace. The tide-line is a particularly significant area, a penumbral zone that is both of the sea and above it, forever half-immersed in the great time-womb. If you accept the sea as an image of the unconscious, then this mass beachward urge might be seen as an attempt to escape from the narrow existential role of ordinary life and return to the great universal time-sea—"

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"Roger, please!" Mildred looked away wearily. "You sound like Charles Sherrington."

Pelham stared out to sea again. Below him, a radio commentator announced the position and speed of the successfully launched satellite, and its pathway around the globe. Idly, Pelham calculated that it would take some fifteen minutes to reach them, almost exactly at half past three. Of course it would not be visible from the beach, although Sherrington's recent work on the perception of infrared radiation suggested some of the infrared light reflected from the sun might be perceived subliminally by their retinas.

REFLECTING on the opportunities this offered to a commercial or political demagogue, Pelham listened to the radio on the sand below, when a long white arm reached out and switched it off. The possessor of the arm, a plump white-skinned girl with the face of a placid madonna, her round cheeks framed by ringlets of black hair, rolled over on to her back, disengaging herself from her companions, and for a moment she and Pelham exchanged glances. He assumed that she had deliberately switched off the radio to prevent him hearing the commentary, and then realized that in fact the girl had been listening to his voice and hoped that he would resume his monologue.

Flattered, Pelham studied the girl's round serious face, and her mature but child-like figure stretched out almost as close to him, and as naked, as she would have been had they shared a bed. Her frank, adolescent but curiously tolerant expression barely changed, and Pelham turned away, unwilling to accept its implications, realizing with a pang the profound extent of his resignation to Mildred, and the now unbreachable insulation this provided against any new or real experience in his life. For ten years the thousand cautions and compromises accepted each day to make existence tolerable had steadily secreted their numbing anodynes, and what remained of his original personality, with all its possibilities, was embalmed like a specimen in a jar. Once he would have despised himself for accepting his situation so passively, but he was now beyond any real self-judgment, for no criteria were valid by which to assess himself, a state of gracelessness far more abject than that of the vulgar, stupid herd on the beach around him.

"Something's in the water." Mildred pointed along the shore. "Over there."

PELHAM followed her raised arm. Two hundred yards away a small crowd had gathered at the waters edge, the sluggish waves

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breaking at their feet as they watched some activity in the shallows. Many of the people had raised newspapers to shield their heads, and the older women in the group held their skirts between their knees.

"I can't see anything." Pelham rubbed his chin, distracted by a bearded man on the edge of the promenade above him, a face not Sherrington's but remarkably like it. "There seems to be no danger, anyway. Some unusual sea-fish may have been cast ashore."

On the terrace, and below on the beach, everyone was waiting for something to happen, heads craned forward expectantly. As the radios were turned down, so that any sounds from the distant tableau might be heard, a wave of silence passed along the beach like an immense darkening cloud shutting off the sunlight. The almost complete absence of noise and movement, after the long hours of festering motion, seemed strange and uncanny, focussing an intense atmosphere of self-awareness upon the thousands of watching figures.

The group by the water's edge remained where they stood, even the small children staring placidly at whatever held the attention of their parents. For the first time a narrow section of the beach was visible, a clutter of radios and beach equipment half-buried in the sand like discarded metallic refuse. Gradually the new arrivals pressing down from the promenade occupied the empty places,a maneuver carried out without any reaction from the troupe by the tide-line. To Pelham they seemed like a family of penitent pilgrims who had travelled some enormous distance and were now standing beside the sacred waters, waiting patiently for its revivifying powers to restore them.

"What *is* going on?" Pelham asked, when after several minutes there was no indication of movement from the water-side group. He noticed that they formed a straight line, following the shore, rather than an arc. "They're not watching anything at all."

THE off-shore haze was now only five hundred yards away, obscurring the contours of the huge swells. Completely opaque, the water looked like warm oil, a few wavelets now and then dissolving into greasy bubbles as they expired limply on the sand, intermingled with bits of refuse and old cigarette cartons. Nudging the shore like this, the sea resembled an enormous pelagic beast roused from its depths and blindly groping at the sand.

"Mildred, I'm going down to the water for a moment." Pelham stood up. "There's some-

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thing curious—" He broke off, pointing to the beach on the other side of the terrace. "Look! There's another group. What on earth—?"

Again, as everyone watched, this second body of spectators formed by the water's edge seventy-five yards from the terrace. Altogether some two hundred people were silently assembling along the shore-line, gazing out across the sea in front of them. Pelham found himself cracking his knuckles, then clasped the rail with both hands, as much to restrain himself from joining them. Only the congestion on the beach held him back.

This time the interest of the crowd passed in a few moments, and the murmur of background noise resumed.

"Heavens knows what they're doing." Mildred turned her back on the group. "There are more of them over there. They must be waiting for something."

Sure enough, half a dozen similar groups were now forming by the water's edge, at almost regular one hundred yard intervals. Pelham scanned the far ends of the bay for any signs of a motor boat. He glanced at his watch. It was nearly 3:30. "They can't be waiting for anything," he said, trying to control his nervousness. Below the table his feet twitched a restless tattoo, gripping for purchase on the sandy cement. "The only thing expected is the satellite, and no-one will see that anyway. There must be something in the water." At the mention of the satellite he remembered Sherrington again. "Mildred, don't you feel—"

Before he could continue the man behind him stood up with a curious lurch, as if hoping to reach the rail, and tipped the sharp edge of his seat into Pelham's back. For a moment, as he struggled to steady the man, Pelham was enveloped in a rancid smell of sweat and stale beer. He saw the glazed focus in the other's eyes, his rough unshaved chin and open mouth like a muzzle, pointing with a sort of impulsive appetite towards the sea.

"The satellite!" Freeing himself, Pelham craned upwards at the sky. A pale impassive blue, it was clear of both aircraft and birds—although they had seen gulls twenty miles inland that morning, as if a storm had been anticipated. As the glare stung his eyes, points of retinal light began to arc and swerve across the sky in epileptic orbits. One of these, however, apparently emerging from the western horizon, was moving steadily across the edge of his field of vision, boring dimly towards him.

AROUND them, people began to stand up, and chairs scraped and dragged across the

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floor. Several bottles toppled from one of the tables and smashed on the concrete.

"Mildred!"

Below them, in a huge disorganized melée extending as far as the eye could see, people were climbing slowly to their feet. The diffused murmur of the beach had given way to a more urgent, harsher sound, echoing overhead from either end of the bay like the migrating call of some vast herd of animals. The whole beach seemed to writhe and stir with activity, the only motionless figures those of the people standing by the water. These now formed a continuous palisade along the shore, shutting off the sea. More and more people continually joined their ranks, and in places the line was nearly ten deep.

Everyone on the terrace was now standing. The crowds already on the beach were being driven forward by the pressure of new arrivals from the promenade, and the party below their table had been swept a further twenty yards towards the sea.

"Mildred, can you see Sherrington anywhere?" Confirming from her wrist-watch that it was exactly 3:30, Pelham pulled her shoulder, trying to hold her attention. Mildred returned what was almost a vacant stare, an expression of glazed incomprehension. "Mildred! We've got to get away from here!" Hoarsely, he shouted: "Sherrington's convinced we can see some of the infrared light shining from the satellites, they may form a pattern setting off IRM's laid down millions of years ago when other space vehicles were circling the earth. Mildred—!"

HELPLESSLY, they were lifted from their seats and pressed against the rail. A huge concourse of people was moving down the beach, and soon the entire five-mile-long slope was packed with standing figures. No-one was talking, and everywhere there was the same expression, self-immersed and preoccupied, like that on the faces of a crowd leaving a stadium. Behind them the great wheel of the fairground was rotating slowly, but the gondolas were empty, and Pelham had a sudden vision of the deserted fun-fair only a hundred yards from the multitude on the beach, its roundabouts revolving among the empty sideshows.

Quickly he helped Mildred over the edge of the rail, then jumped down on to the sand, hoping to work their way back to the promenade. As they stepped around the corner, however, the crowd advancing down the beach carried them back, tripping over the abandoned radios in the sand.

Still together, they found their footing when the pressure behind

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them ceased. Steadying himself, Pelham continued: ". . . Sherrington thinks Cro-Magnon Man was driven frantic by panic, like the Gadarene swine—most of the bone-beds have been found under lake shores. The reflex may be too strong—" He broke off.

The noise had suddenly subsided, as the immense congregation, now packing every available square foot of the beach, stood silently facing the water. Pelham turned towards the sea, where the haze, only fifty yards away, edged in great clouds towards the beach. The forward line of the crowd, their heads bowed slightly, stared passively at the gathering billows. The surface of the water glowed with an intense luminous light, vibrant and spectral, and the air over the beach, grey by comparison, made the lines of motionless figures loom like tombstones.

Obliquely in front of Pelham, twenty yards away in the front rank, stood a tall man with a quiet, meditative expression, his beard and high temples identifying him without doubt.

"Sherrington!" Pelham started to shout. Involuntarily he looked upwards to the sky, and felt a blinding speck of light singe his retinas.

In the background the music of the fun-fair revolved insanely in the empty air.

Then, with a galvanic surge, everyone on the beach began to walk forward into the water.

THE END

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KILLJOY

By F. A. JAVOR

The Yalli hunts were the peak of sporting excitement—which is why they were illegal. And Wally, trembling, made sure they would be even more exciting next time.

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THE run out to the sporting planet Domnik III was long and dull, and it was the practice of the more jaded hunt-ship captains to break the monotony for themselves and their well-paying clients by warping out at Suspi for a little Yalli shooting.

It was illegal, of course, and meant a stunning fine and a mandatory jail sentence for anyone a Warden ship might catch aground on the reservation planet. But Yalli shooting was reputed to have a unique thrill that its initiates refused to divulge and no hunt-ship captain had yet had his offer of a clandestine landing refused on any Warden's account.

And Wally Re's group was no different. Back on the water world of Merc, Wally was a marine biologist. Well paid to stay for ten earth-months in the bubble labs under the waters of a flooded planet, he was taking his thirty day rotation leave before being assigned to another identical bubble, under the identical waters of an identical world for another ten earth-months.

Wally was no hunter, but the idea of nearly a month of the day-long sunlight and the open air of a sporting planet appealed to him, and the idea of an off-trail stop on a forbidden world caught his fancy.

He grinned. "Sure," he said to Anker, the hunt-ship coxswain, when the stocky spaceman approached him in the usual preliminary feeling out before the captain actually committed himself to the mention of an illegal stop. "When?"

Anker shook his head and smiled. "Not now," he said. "We'll let you know." And he moved away toward Vogel, the fat Boran land broker, with the oddly delicate step that the hunt-ship's one-third gravity made natural.

Wally saw Vogel nod, his slack lips stretching in a smile, and Anker moved along to Eckert and Allen and the others in the plasti-mahogany panelled lounge. Saw them all break into grins and nod.

Finally, Wally watched Anker nod to the blonde-bearded captain standing, casual looking, by the entry door. Watched the blue-and-silver uniformed man shift the wad of vanta-nut in his cheek and come forward.

"Gentlemen," he said, but he needn't have called for attention. They were all, Wally included, sitting on the edges of their plasti-cushioned chairs, the drinks in their hands forgotten.

"Gentlemen. In less than an hour our coordinates will be opposite those of a small planet called Suspi. You all know the penalty for an unauthorized stopping, but you've indicated that you want me to risk it."

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His eyes circled the room, came to rest at a spot high on one bulkhead. "Gentlemen, as captain of your chartered craft I am actually in your collective employ and since you insist, I have no choice but to do as you order. Mr. Anker," to the grinning coxswain, "carry on." And the captain left the lounge.

"The curly fox," Wally laughed to himself. "He might go to jail for making the landing, but he isn't risking that Master's ticket of his. No, sir. Technically, a space lawyer could claim he was only acting on owner's orders."

Anker was speaking into the ship's intercom on his wrist. "Okay. Bring them in."

AND in a moment three of the blue-coverall clad crew came into the lounge draped with what looked to the surprised Wally very much like NavAir web sidearm belts, except that the tops of the holsters had been cut away to let the weapon butts project out into the clear.

The coxswain's grin widened. "Not the finest of arms, I guess," handing out the gunbelts, two to a man, "but we have to jettison them each trip. We get pretty thoroughly searched for contraband before we land at Domnik."

Vogel, the land broker, was turning one of the weapons over in his fat hands. "Why, this is an ordinary pellet gun," he said. "Six shots the cylinder carries. Forty-five caliber at most. What kind of game can you bring down with this?"

But Eckert, the tall necra salesman, had already strapped both guns low on his hips and standing, was twirling them by their trigger guards, slapping them into their holsters, snatching them out, flipping them over his arms, catching them, spinning them, in, out, all the while bashing his teeth in a broad grin.

Anker laughed, nodding at Eckert. "You are going to have a ball. But," he said, "you don't wear but the one gun for a Yalli shoot."

Eckert looked puzzlde. "Wear just the one gun? Then why the two . . . ?"

But Anker cut him off with the wave of a hand. "You'll find out when the time comes. Believe me."

The stocky coxswain spoke to them all now. "There are a few ground rules before I tell you how the hunt goes."

Wally leaned forward in his seat, saw the others do the same, and smiled to himself. If a Yalli shoot needed a preliminary build-up to give it its unique charge, the crew of this hunt-ship were doing a good job of getting him and the others worked up.

The coxswain was talking.

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"First, we warp out and land for exactly thirty minutes. Watch the time."

Vogel snorted. "Some hunt. Thirty minutes." But he was only echoing the murmer of disappointment that rose from the gathered men.

Anker held up his hands. "It sounds like nothing, I know, but it's enough. Believe me, it's enough."

Then when they were quieted down again he went on. "Thirty minutes, because our departure and arrival times are very closely watched and any greater discrepancy than that will bring the captain up on the carpet for an explanation. And we don't want that. Thirty minutes, understood?"

He looked around the circled men, waited for each of them to nod in turn before he went on. It seemed important to him.

"Take the survival kits you were issued when you came aboard. Any man still ashore at the end of thirty minutes will be left behind."

Again the murmur from the assembled hunters. Again Anker raised his hands for silence. "Will be left behind for the Wardens to pick up, and all his gear, every trace of him ever having been aboard this vessel, jettisoned."

"The passenger lists," Vogel said.

"He chartered passage," the coxswain said, "but he never came aboard. If he was picked up on a reservation planet, then he must have gotten there on his own, we certainly didn't put him down there."

WALLY felt the silence settling on the hunters. The illegality of their contemplated action was beginning to sink home to them and he wondered if their mouths were beginning to feel as dry as his. He shook himself. The coxswain was doing a good job with his build-up.

Vogel shrugged his fat shoulders, and, after a moment, the coxswain went on. "Now for the hunt itself. You wear the one gun, carry the other. Into the forest.

"Find a clearing. Drop the one gun on the ground at one side, step back about fifteen feet, then do this. . . ."

Anker threw back his head, opened his mouth and bellowed.

Wally jumped in his seat at the unexpected sound.

"Got that," Anker said. "Ha-ha-hoo. The words are important. Try it. Ha-ha-hoo."

Grinning sheepishly at each other, they did as they were told. "Ha-ha-hoo."

"Fine. But loud. That's all."

"That's all?" and Wally heard his own voice rising with that of the others.

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The crewmen were grinning at each other but it was Anker who nodded. "That's all. Yalli hunting is not like any other kind in all the worlds. You do what I just told you to do and you'll get a charge like you never had before."

Vogel was shaking his head, his fat jowls flapping. "Nothing doing. I don't go into any strange forest, put a loaded gun down on the ground, step fifteen feet away from it and wait to see what happens. Count me out."

The crew stopped grinning. "He's gotta go," Wally heard one of them whisper to Anker. "The captain won't land unless everybody is in on it." He looked around at the hunters, licked his lips. "Maybe even just mentioning it . . ." and his voice trailed off.

Anker laughed shortly. "The captain's been making these landings for nine years and he hasn't lost a client yet," he said to Vogel.

"Count me out," Vogel repeated, his slack lips now pressed tight.

"You'll ruin it for all the others," the coxswain pointed out.

The fat land broker from Boran did not even answer him.

"There's one in every crowd," Wally heard someone say, but Vogel did not budge.

Anker sighed and spoke into the intercom on his wrist, and the blonde-bearded captain, when he came in, took Vogel to the far end of the lounge, whispered in his ear.

Wally saw the change spreading in Vogel's heavy face He was grinning broadly by the time the captain stepped back and said, "Now you know. Now you're an accessory. You can stay aboard."

"No," Vogel was all smiles now. "I'll go. I'll go." And with fat hands buckled on his gun.

The captain shifted his vantanut quid from one cheek to the other. "I thought you would. But it's never the same once you know."

SUSPI'S sun was larger than the earth's and nearer. Wally blinked at its brightness when the shields had been slid away from the hunt-ship's ports and they could look out at the reservation planet rising up to meet them. Green, lighter than Earth, perhaps, but pleasant looking. In the distance the bright glint of water.

"Thirty minutes," the coxswain warned them as they all stepped to the head of the ship's landing ramp. Captain, crew, and clients, all armed and eager. Wally, the gun on his hip pulling strangely, the holster tied down on his leg by a crewman, settled the web belt with its hook-and-eye buckle, nodded his under-

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standing with the others, His second weapon he carried slung over his shoulder, hooked across his palm.

"One thing more," Anker said, "spread out. Don't buddy up. If there's more than one of you anywhere near each other, the Yalli won't show. This is strictly a loner's sport. Got it?"

"Wait a minute," the gun-knowing Eckert said. "How will I know a Yalli when I see one?"

"You'll know," the coxswain said. "You'll know."

They fanned out from the hunt-ship, each man going his own way as Anker had told them they must do, the captain and the crew heading off in their own direction. The sun on Wally's back was hotter than any he'd felt in a long time and he panted, not knowing if it was from the heat or his own tension now that he was alone; made even more uncertain by the lighter-than-Earth pull of Suspi's gravity.

A clearing, small but unmistakable, through the fern-like trees ahead.

Wally hesitated, then, taking a deep breath, stepped into its open ring. He dropped the one gunbelt and its weapon at the edge. Carefully he paced off the fifteen feet, turned.

He took a breath, threw back his head and opened his mouth.

"Ha-ha-hoo."

It was little more than a rasping whisper. Wally worked his dry mouth and tried again. Forcing himself, suddenly surprised more than a little at how the sweat was pouring from him, how he seemed to be shaking.

"HA-HA-HOO!"

It was loud, unexpectedly so, but in a way satisfying too.

"Ha-ha-hoo!"

Wally stood waiting, listening, hearing nothing, eyes darting. The thin air straining his lungs, seeming like thin water now.

A rustle!

A rustle at the far side of the clearing, by the gun, and Wally gasped.

TALL. Tall as a man was the Yalli. Barrel chested and spindly legged as befitted the oxygen-lean air and light gravity of this, its home planet. Hair, red, glinting in the light of the big sun, on its chest and on its arms, and along its legs like the fringing on an ancient frontiersman's garments. Male.

And the head, not human certainly, not even simian, but the eyes, deep set and brown, and the mouth, toothless and bird-like, small over that protruding jaw.

The mouth opened. "Ha-ha-hoo!" Clear and bell-like. "Ha-ha-hoo." And the Yalli, stooping, scooped up the second gun and snapped it on in an easy and al-

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most unbelievably rapid movement.

Now it was ready. Webbed feet spread apart, arms at its sides, the brown eyes on Wally, steady and waiting.

And now Wally understood the unique thrill of a Yalli shoot and wished himself back in the monotony of the crusing huntship, the dreary drip of his water worlds.

His hands trembled, the sweat dripping down his arms and from his palms, his lungs and heart pumping, and looking at him, filling his world, the level eyes of the Yalli. The Yalli he'd just seen move with incredible speed.

"Ha-ha-hoo," Wally said, and tried to make it sound friendly.

"Ha-ha-hoo," the Yalli answered, and crouched a little lower.

Retreat! Very slowly Wally moved his foot in a backward step, never taking his eyes from the Yalli.

It advanced a step, the webbed foot moving, birdlike, almost instantaneously to the new position.

Fast. Wally had never seen a movement so fast, and now the blood was pounding in his eyes, making itself seen in the webbing, pulsing pattern of lights. There was no going back for him now, he must make his move. In the face of that incredibly rapid motion, he must make his move.

His tongue darted out, licking his parched lips, but it had no moisture to give them.

Now!

He snatched at the gun in his holster, but even as he pulled it out and fired again and again at the Yalli, he knew he was too late to save himself. The Yalli had moved so fast that to Wally's straining eyes the gun had seemed to just suddenly *be* in its outthrust hand.

And then surprise, and a throat filling wonder choked Wally. He was standing, but the Yalli. . . .

The Yalli. The gun, pointed at him still, but unfired.

The Yalli hadn't fire''

Stains on its chest. Brown, but blood, Wally supposed. It coughed, once, blood from the birdlike mouth, and then it slowly crumpled where it stood, the gun hand slackening, the weapon still unfired.

Wally ran to it, the gun clutched in his hand, but forgotten now. It was warm, its shoulder felt warm to his hand upon it, but the Yalli did not stir.

HE reached to take the gun from its hand and, tugging to free it from the Yalli's death grip, knew suddenly why it had not fired at him.

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Knew suddenly and retched at the knowledge, and at the thought of the men who called this killing sport; at the fat Vogel who, knowing of it, could not wait to come ashore.

And now Wally became aware of his own gun still in his hand, and he stood up and flung it. Sobbing, he flung it with all this strength and sent it arcing high above the fern-like tree tops. He unhooked his belt and holster and threw it from him.

Then he knelt down beside the Yalli and, his touch tender, gently worked to free the gun from its grasp.

A tendon, like the branch-grasping one of a bird, holding the nailless thumb firm on the pistol grip. He flung the pistol after his other.

The hand . . . and why the Yalli did not fire, could not fire, at him. Boned, to his probing touch, three fingers. But not three fingers open and spreading, but closed, imbedded in muscle and sinew. A hand shaped not like a glove, but like a mitten. The Yalli could grasp the gun, did grasp the gun, but it had no fingers with which to pull the trigger.

In Wally's mind a thought was forming. He stood up, fumbled for his survival kit hung on his belt at the back. The knife, folded, he triggered open and checked its razor sharp blade.

"Good," he said aloud and snapped it shut. He had to find another Yalli.

He lifted the one he had killed, hid it under the trees. "Ha-ha-hoo," he bellowed back in the clearing. "Ha-ha-hoo."

No Yalli came and Wally knew he must find another clearing.

And now, somewhere behind him, he hard a distant roaring and knew that his thirty minutes were up and the hunt-ship was blasitng off without him.

No matter, he had to find another clearing and another Yalli. "Ah, up ahead."

"Ha-ha-hoo."

No guns this time, just the knife, out of sight in his pocket. "Ha-ha-hoo."

There, that rustle, a Yalli? Yes. Another male.

Wally stepped forward. "Ha-ha-hoo," he said and waited. He could not match the Yalli's incredible speed, surprise was his only chance.

"Ha-ha-hoo," he said and moved forward another step.

"Ha-ha-hoo," the Yalli said and, its eyes moving about, it scooped up a small branch from the ground.

Good, Wally said to himself, it feels it needs a weapon. With his empty hands he might just have it confused enough.

Another step and he would be in reach. Close up the Yalli had

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a not unpleasant doglike odor he hadn't noticed on the one he'd killed.

He was close enough. Now! And Wally's open right hand suddenly made of itself a fist and darted full force for the huge jaw under the birdlike mouth.

The Yalli crumpled without a sound.

Wally stood over it, rubbing his knuckles. "Glass," he said. "I never saw a big jaw like that that wasn't solid glass." And, reaching into his pocket, he drew out his knife and triggered open its razor sharp blade.

HIS cell on the Warden ship was not large, but comfortable enough, and Wally was glad at long last to be in it. The fine would break him, he was sure, and the jail sentence would play hob with his getting any decent assignments for a long while to come, but he could stand it, knowing what he'd done with his knife to as many Yalli as he could find before the Warden's heat-pickups had zeroed in on him.

His knife, and now Wally hugged himself and laughed. Laughed until the guard sitting in the corridor outside his cell came up to its door to look in on him.

"I wish you'd tell me what's so funny," he said, a little ruefully.

Wally wiped his eyes. "You'll never know," he said. "News of this kind of a joke isn't likely to get around."

The guard went away, shaking his head and Wally laughed again. Laughed at the mighty hunters who might at this very moment each be standing his solitary duel with a Yalli.

But a Yalli who Wally, with his razor sharp knife and marine biologist's skill, had slashed upon the hand. A Yalli who now had a perhaps unpretty but perfectly serviceable trigger finger.

THE END

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EVE TIMES FOUR

By POUL ANDERSON

ILLUSTRATED by GRAYAM

Most men would be satisfied to be cast away on a deserted planet with one beautiful girl for a companion. But not John Jacob Newhouse.

ARSANG talked on. And on. And on.

"It is indeed a pity," he said, "though, of course, long ago foreseeable, through the diversity of protein structures and the consequent development of mutually poisonous biochemistries—not to mention the basic variations in stellar and planetary types—it is, I say, regrettable that the percentage of worlds suitable for any given species is so small. And then, to be sure, this is reduced still further by those planets which already have autochthonous intelligent species. These would hardly welcome alien colonists."

Teresina Fabian gazed in despair out of that viewport which formed one whole wall of the lounge. Space glittered with suns and suns; but she stood in an almost visible fog of shrill platitudes, and there was no escape. How had she ever been trapped into this? By being kind to Arsang, she decided, by not cutting him off the first time his fingers closed about her arm and his voice began to pipe. But how could she have known? This was her first deep-space voyage. The more experienced passengers, aware that every ship has its bore, recognized the dread tokens at once and gave Arsang a wide orbit.

"So the colonies planted by any given race, such as your own, are scattered thinly through that small portion of the galaxy we know," he continued, as importantly as he had earlier informed her that she was, of course, a graduate student of mathematics, bound

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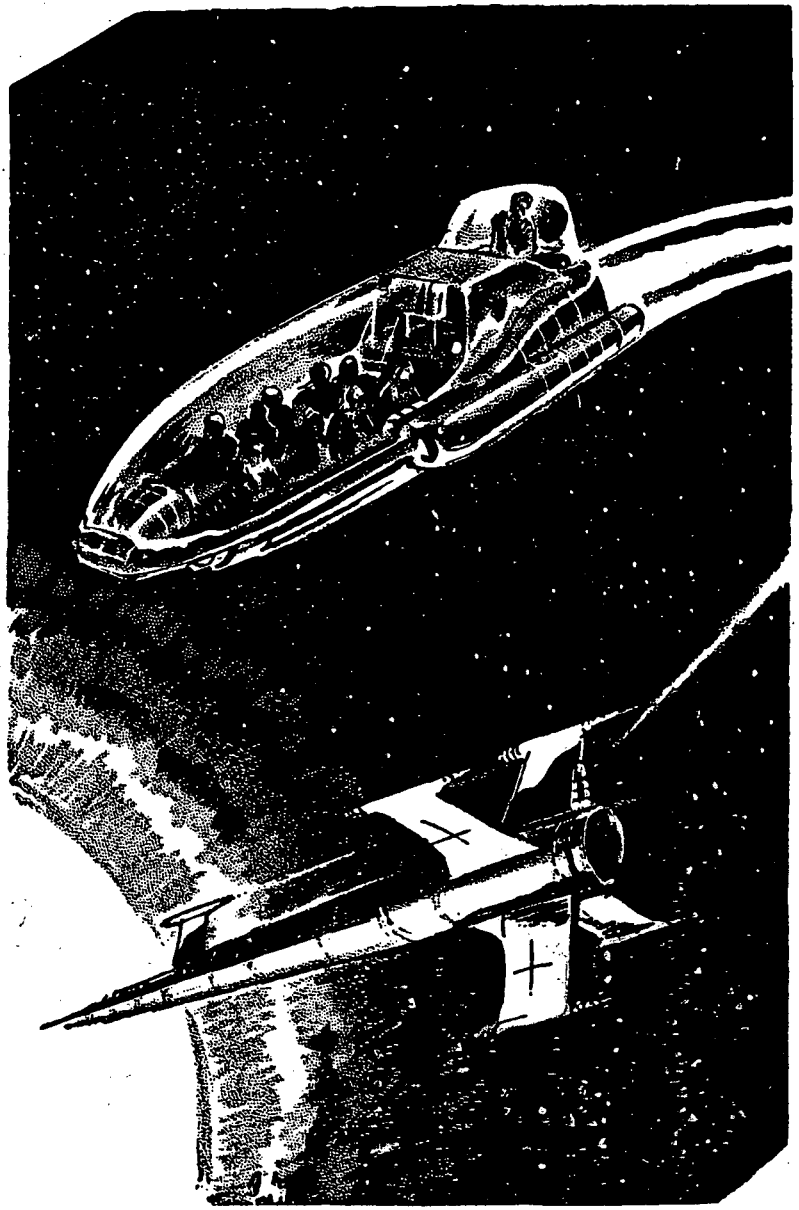

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for a year of study on a newly autonomous human-settled planet as part of an exchange program. "The distance between Earth and Xenophon, 154 light-years approximately, is not an unusual hop for a liner such as this. But the round-trip cruise on which most of our fellow passengers are embarked must necessarily zigzag so much between the systems it visits, that side trips to the less important places lying more or less along our route, become impractical. One would not add an extra week of travel time merely to spend a single day looking at the Great Mud Mountain on New Ganymede, the double planet Holmes-Watson, the satellite system of Kepler, or the craters on Jotunheim, even though these are all terrestroid worlds with human colonies and do not lie very far off our path. You see, they are such new colonies: one tiny settlement on each, with little entertainment to offer, and otherwise a nearly unexplored wilderness. Having seen the one spectacular sight, what would our tourists do with their evening? Whereas Xenophon, where you get off, or my own Betelgeuse Eight, Numa, which the ship will reach on the homeward arc of its circuit and where, of course, I disembark to report to my colleagues in the diplomatic service of His Awe-Inspiring Refulgence, Pipp XI, Supreme Overlord of the United States of Korlaband—"

The high-pitched lecture began to take on a chanting quality. Bemused, half asleep, Teresina had a dream-like feeling that she stood in the anteroom of eternity and heard a cantor or priest hold some unending ceremony. . . .

She grew conscious that another human had entered the lounge. For a moment her heart fluttered in the hope of deliverance. Even if it was John Jacob Newhouse—fighting off his attentions was better than being talked at by Arsang XXXIII, Lord High Gongbeater to the Prideful Court of His Awe-Inspiring Refulgence Pipp XI—anything was better, she was suffering a fate worse than death and hadn't even been offered an apartment, jewels, money.

The third mate checked his stride an instant. He was a good-looking young man, with dark wavy hair and regular features. His uniform, blue tunic, white pants, peaked cap, didn't hurt those looks a bit. Of all this he was thoroughly cognizant. A moment his eyes

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lingered on her, frankly admiring.

Teresina was of the tall and willowy persuasion, with long blonde hair and large blue eyes, snub nose and slightly parted lips. Her black kirtle and white mantle had childlike connotations on Earth, protective coloration for a shy girl who didn't know quite what to do when a man spoke to her in any language but mathematics. The trouble was, as Newhouse had quickly observed, such an outfit looked remarkably sexy on a space liner.

But then Arsang had cornered her, and Arsang could outchaperone any Spanish duenna. Not that the Betelgeusean was unprepossessing. He had a certain elfin quality, big dome of a head and small torso poised on four spidery legs, two slender arms waving in time with his fronded ears, hairless pale-gold skin, the face quasi-human but with great green eyes, the clothing a filmy shimmer of veils. His size, below one meter, added to the charm. However, he talked.

"Ah, Miss Fabian." Newhouse swept a bow in her direction. "I hope you are enjoying yourself?"

Teresina gritted her teeth. "Yes, thank you!" she said.

Newhouse raised one brow, threw her an outrageous wink, and continued on his way. Teresina stared after him with smoldering eyes. Really, he was inexcusable! Not that she was cold or . . . or anything . . . of course she wanted to get married some day, and so on (here she blushed, and even diverted her attention back to Arsang for a moment) . . .. but that scene on the promenade deck, near the start of the voyage, well, after all, a man might wait a little while after being introduced before mauling a girl around!

With a certain malicious pleasure, Teresina saw Hedwig Trumbull rise hastily from her cocktail, to seize the mate's arm. Undoubtedly: "Oh, dear Mr. Newhouse—or *may* I call you Jack?—" But the officer seemed to claim urgent business; at any rate, Hedwig Trumbull returned to her table and he went out the other side of the lounge.

"I think," said Teresina, grasping at straws, "I want a before-dinner drink myself."

"By all means," said Arsang. Her faint hopes evaporated as he walked alongside her, still discoursing. Now it was about his special diplomatic mission to the Earth

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government, undertaken to draw up the protocol of a treaty regulating the quigg-sharfen trade. She thought wildly of telling him to go away, he bored her, he reached such heights of dreariness that it was like entering a different continuum. . . . But no. She wasn't capable of it. She would always remember, afterward, that she had hurt a lonely little being for the sake of a few days' pleasure.

She sat down and stared at the pneumoserv. It stared back at her. She remembered vaguely that a martini was gin and, what was it, oh, yes, vermouth, and wondered what proportions. At last she dialed for half and half.

Fortunately, the alarm went off at that exact moment.

Even Arsang stopped talking when the bell-tone racketed between the walls. As it died away, some woman at another table screamed and huddled close to her escort.

A magnified voice boomed out: "Attention, all passengers, attention, all passengers. This is First Mate Lefkowitz on the bridge, addressing all passengers. The captain will speak to you in a moment. Please remain calm," etc., etc.

There was a sound of clicking relays. The amplifiers carried a whisper, "Wake up, sir, for God's sake," and an "Uh, oh, oof, huh?" in reply, before hurriedly switching back to more alarm bells.

"What is this outrage?" shrilled Arsang.

"I believe—" Teresina wet her lips. Her pulse seemed very noisy, all at once. "I think it's the signal to go to the lifeboats."

"Yes, lifeboats, yes, that's it, lifeboats," roared a sleep-fogged voice from the loudspeaker. "Lifeboats. You all remember your lifeboat drill, uh . . . ahhh-*hoo!* This is Captain Ironsmiter speaking, ladies and gentlebeings. No need to get alarmed. That is, well, naturally you have been alarmed, by the alarm bells, I mean. That's what they're for, isn't it? But what I want to say, that is to say, don't be afraid. Have faith. Nothing to be afraid of. Some or other little trouble, the automatic alarms went off. We haven't located the trouble yet, but we will. Meanwhile, have faith. Uh, did I tell you this is Captain Ironsmiter speaking? To the passengers, that is, such as hear me, and I do hope that each and every one of you can hear me. All crewmen will report to, what, oh, yes, emergency stations. This is just an automatic

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alarm. Maybe the converter's developed a slight flutter, maybe the radiation screen has weakened, temporarily, that is, but anyhow, just go to your lifeboat stations, the ones to which you have each and every one been assigned to, and as soon as we've found the trouble and fixed it—that is, to say, it's only a precaution, and—" The captain was cut out of the circuit in favor of more alarm bells.

"I'm in Fourteen," said Teresina. She leaped to her feet. "I'll be seeing you, Mr. Arsang."

"Oh, I'll come along with you," grumbled the Betelgeusean.

"What?" wailed Teresina. "But you aren't . . . it isn't . . . I remember the drill distinctly, and your station isn't—"

"I know, I know, I know," snapped Arsang. "But how should I know which one it is? Do they expect me, hereditary Lord High Gongbeater to the Prideful Court of H.A.R. Pipp XI, and special diplomatic representative from the United States of Korlaband, to attend some wretched little lifeboat drill? Come along, now, come along." He took her arm and hustled her forward with a strength remarkable in the native of a rather low-gravity planet. "Incompetence!" he shrilled. "Utter, unpardonable incompetence! I shall criticize the company in the strongest terms! See if I don't!"

The passageways were a millstream of babbling tourists and valiantly struggling stewards, through which an occasional spaceman struggled toward his post of duty. Swirled around a corner, Teresina saw Fred of the Gombar Road and remembered that he was in her section. "Can you give me some help?" she cried. "I can't make any headway in this mess."

"Why, indeed, Miss Fabian, I shall be honored," said the mild basso, a meter above her. One huge arm bent downward in an inviting crook. Teresina sprang up and settled herself. Fred's shaggy, blue, rhinoceros-like body plowed onward, his centauroid torso breasting a virtual bow wave of humans. Arsang followed close behind, sputtering.

Teresina leaned toward one fan-shaped ear and said above the hubbub: "Do you think this is anything serious, Mr. Fred?"

"I trust not," replied the other. "Dear me, I do trust not. I was so looking forward to visiting Xenophon and seeing a virile pioneer culture

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at first hand." His small trunk waggled as he lowered his head to get its purple comb under a light fixture. The beady eyes glittered with anxiety. "I must confess to severe disappointment during my stay on Earth. There was no poetic inspiration for me. None whatsoever. Oh, don't think I blame your species, please, Miss Fabian. Everyone was most kind and hospitable. But you see, I had come as an enthusiastic student of Baudelaire. I felt I must live where he lived, just as he lived fully to understand him. But nobody on Earth seemed to be interested nowadays in decadence." His meter-wide shoulders gave an earthquake shrug. "And it is not practical to be decadent all by oneself."

Teresina wondered if she had traded the frying pan for the heating coils.

Then they were at the lifeboat, through its airlock and into the seating section. The miniature spaceship would normally have carried ten humans, but since Fred was assigned to it there were only four Terrestrials present. Teresina strapped herself into a chair next to a stewardess, one Marie Quesnay. She was probably the most sensible person aboard. Besides, though it was a nasty trick, Teresina managed thus to slough Arsang off on Fred.

"What do you think the trouble is?" she asked, half fearfully.

Marie spread her hands. She was small, brown-haired, vivacious, the blue kirtle and red tights of her uniform pleasingly stretched by a more than adequate figure. "Oh, la, Ma'm'selle, it is not to say. As the captain announced, some little trouble. These alarms are not uncommon. One is always so vairry careful in space. An hour here we sit, maybe two hours, then it is all over with and they let us go again. And tomorrow all passengers get free champagne with dinner, to make the apology."

"Oh." Teresina relaxed. She achieved a timid greeting across the aisle to the other two humans, Kamala Chatterji and Hedwig Trumbull. The latter was making steam-whistle noises of indignation. Kamala answered with soothing admonitions to seek peace of personality.

Teresina remembered that the Indian girl was bound for Xenophon at her own expense (which she could well afford) as an Inner Reformist missionary. She was quite beautiful, in a dark dignified

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way; her pink sari enhanced a slim form. In fact, Hedwig Trumbull was the only female in this boat who was not better looking than average. Teresina recalled that Hedwig had traded assignments with a stunning redhead . . . in hopes of a chance at the handsome crewman who was—

Footsteps clacked in the airlock. Third Mate Newhouse strolled in, balanced on his heels, and grinned around an impudently cocked cigaret. "All comfy?" he said.

"Where's our pilot?" demanded the Trumbull.

Newhouse grimaced faintly in her direction and turned eyes on her more decorative seatmate. "A slight reshuffling," he said. "I had reason to think the trouble would require some electronics work, so I ordered Mr. Manfred to stand by in the shop. He's the electronician's mate, you know. And then, naturally, I had to take his place in your boat."

Hedwig simpered. "A fair exchange, I'm sure." She was on the dumpy and dish-faced side, fashionably gowned, hair dyed green according to the very latest mode. She was also a spinster verging on desperation. Teresina realized that her own sufferings before Arsang were perhaps matched by those of one or two eligible bachelors on the cruise.

"Oh, this is simply thrilling!" warbled Hedwig.

"Peace is all," said Kamala. "One begins on the mundane level with relaxation techniques."

"—the current status of the quiggsharfen trade is, of course, determined by the following factors," said Arsang, droning on as usual.

"Fortunately," said Fred, "I discovered a new Terrestrial poet, the singer of largeness, of democracy, of, in short, non-decadence. I refer to Mr. Walt Whitman."

Marie cocked a suspicious eye at Newhouse. "And what reasons had you, M'sieur, for this action?" she inquired.

"I'm the officer here, Miss Quesnay," huffed Newhouse. Quickly, bowing: "Though I have never before had so charming a crew member under me." His glance lit on Arsang. "Hey, there! What are you doing—"

Teresina closed her eyes and tried to pass the time by mentally integrating $e^x \log^n x \, dx$.

Something buzzed. Newhouse spun on his heel. "Lord have mercy!" he cried, and vanished forward. The door

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to the pilot turret slammed behind him.

Seconds later, a giant's fist slammed Teresina against her seat. She heard screams, but they seemed infinitely far away. The universe bellowed and pinwheeled around her.

Steadiness came again. Pseudogravity made a floor. Newhouse reached out in a blind automatic fashion and opened the pilot door. Beyond his seated form, Teresina saw an insane whirling in the viewscreens. It steadied as their circuits compensated for spin, aberration, and Doppler effect. She looked into naked space. The immense form of the space liner bulked momentarily against the stars. It vanished before she had drawn another breath.

Newhouse came back from his inspection. The passengers stared at him out of a thickened silence.

He held up a small haywired object. Teresina recognized relays, resistances, and a time switch. "This is it," he said grimly.

"This is what? Do be more explicit," said Arsang, spoiling the whole effect.

"Now, now," soothed Fred, "let Third Mate Newhouse explain in his own words. I, though fetterless, large and various as the people itself, great sprawling clam'rous unsanitary body of Democracy, will hark to the singing mechanic, blithe and strong."

"Quiet!" roared Newhouse. More softly: "If you please. This is a serious matter. We are in danger of our lives."

"Ohh!" wailed Hedwig. She leaped from her chair and flung herself at Newhouse. He was caught off balance. They went down together in a heap. "Save me!" she yammered.

Kamala tugged vainly at her gown, saying, "Peace of soul, peace is all." Fred tried to help, but couldn't push past the crowding humans in the aisle. It was Marie Quesnay who muttered something like "*Nom d'une vieille vache!*" and applied a few brisk swats with the hand to the indicated part of Hedwig. While the various untanglements, tears, recriminations, and soothings went on, Teresina crouched back in her own seat.

Great Gauss, she thought in horror, *what am I trapped into?*

Arsang tugged her sleeve. "I see you have the good sense to remain clear of that disgraceful melee," he said. "Congratulations. You are almost Numan. Numa is, of course, the name of my plan-

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et, Betelgeuse Eight, in the principal language of my country, the United States of Korlaband. I do not say your mind is quite on a level with, say, that of a baron or a knight, or even a peasant (I use crude English equivalents) of the U.S.K., but you would not make a bad barbarian of the Ortip Highlands. You progress, Miss Fabian, you show distinct progress."

He was cut short by Newhouse, who bellowed down all others, smoothed his own hair and dignity, and said in a quick harsh voice:

"I found this gimmick hooked into the control circuit of the release mechanism. Obviously there's been sabotage. Doutbless the ship's alarms were tampered with also, to get us aboard this boat at the time it was scheduled to be thrown free. The communication circuit to the ship has been left open. This means our departure didn't register. They don't know we are missing. Since I'm not normally on duty at this time, they probably won't notice we're gone for hours."

"I should think," said Kamala Chatterji with a calm approaching boredom, "that we could follow the ship."

"Oh, we can try," said Newhouse gloomily. "But the top secondary speed of this boat is about 500 lights. The ship is going nearly 2,000: we don't share that any longer, now when we're out of its drive field. Furthermore, we've no measurable chance of pursuing it in its own precise track. Imagine us deviating by, oh, ten degrees, which is conservative. Imagine then turning around when they miss us, but having no idea of the time at which we left. At speeds like that, can you visualize the volume of space they'd have to search? It's hopeless."

Hedwig Trumbull huffed. "I must say, if this is someone's idea of a joke, it is very childish," she exclaimed. "I am sure this is all the company's fault, for not giving psychiatric tests before selling tickets. Now we shall have to limp off to some miserable colonial world, and wait weeks until—"

Newhouse set his face into still bleaker, though handsome, lines. "I'm afraid it *is* sabotage," he said. "For purposes of murder."

"Oh, no," whispered Teresina. "That's impossible. No one would—"

"Every spacecraft is supposed to carry a pilot's manual with navigation tables,"

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said Newhouse. "Ours is missing."

"What?" yelped Fred. It is something to hear a yelp in basso profundo, but no one appreciated the experience very much.

Newhouse waved a hand at the turret viewport, visible through the open door. "Look at all those stars," he said. "This boat carries supplies for about six months, in which time it could go a distance of some 250 light-years. Do you know how many stars lie in that small radius? I estimate it at ten million. No one can remember the coordinates of so many—or even of the rather small percentage which has thus far been visited, let alone explored or colonized. I can identify a few super-brilliant giants, such as Rigel, but they're much too far for us to reach. Out in a little-known, thinly settled wilderness like this, you're completely dependent on your navigator's bible. And ours is missing!"

For a while, even Arsang was silent.

"We could look—" offered Teresina at last.

"From star to star? That's precisely what we must do," said Newhouse. "But don't get your hopes up. We'll try G-type suns within a reasonable range, but the probability of our hitting one with a settled planet is so small we might as well forget it."

"A planet which is habitable, though, M'sieur?" asked Marie. "I would be satisfied with that, perhaps, me."

Newhouse shrugged. "If you know any prayers, I advise you to say them."

There were plenty of stars near the middle of the main sequence. There generally are. Newhouse used the pilot instruments, including a spectroscope and a luminosity meter, for a while. Then he swung the boat around and kicked it into full secondary drive.

"I picked a sun largely at random," he said. "All I had to go by was that it should be roughly Sol-type and not too far away. You see, only humans have been pioneering this region, and they'd pick such stars. If we don't find them but do find a comfortable planet, our nonhuman friends here will like it too, though the sunlight may have a peculiar color to them. I can't say just how long it'll take us to get there. The shape of a line-of-sight approach curve depends on such things as the star's intrinsic velocity, which I can't deter-

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mine accurately. But it shouldn't be more than about ten Earth-days. Meanwhile, we may as well relax and let the autopilot do the work."

"*Could* it be one of the colonized stars?" asked Kamala hopefully.

"Of course not!" shrilled Arsang. "Who ever heard of colonizing a star? The imprecision of you lesser races! Might it have a colonized planet, Newhouse?"

"I told you, who knows?" shrugged the officer. "The chances are immensely against it, though. They're not quite so much against a habitable world: one which may even have been visited once, be on record in the Survey files. But if it has aborigines—or simply if no one has gotten around to starting a settlement there—it might not be visited again for a century." He smiled. "It's a bit crowded in the turret, but if you want to join me there, one by one, I can point out our destination. Er . . . all but you, Mr. Fred, I'm afraid."

"What does it matter?" said the large being in a cheerful tone. "I, Fred, transcend pettiness, I, standing and yodeling on the island Mannahatta (it's really a spaceboat, but that's not very euphonious) I see the brawling westward swarm, I, myself, me, Fred."

Marie accepted the invitation. The door closed behind her and Newhouse. There was a scuffling sound, a slap, and Marie stamped out saying things which made Teresina glad her own French was so limited. Newhouse rubbed his cheek, grinned brashly, and said: "Next."

The grin faded as Hedwig Trumbull pushed her way down the aisle. He carefully left the door open this time. She closed it. There was a sound of more scuffling and Newhouse emerged, looking hunted.

Arsang rapped for order with a three-fingered fist. "Silence!" he squealed. "Quiet! Listen! Attend! Conference!" When he had them looking at him, he swiveled large green eyes from one to another and said angrily: "We have not yet determined who is responsible for this outrage. At a time when the Lord High Gongbeater to the Prideful Court of His Awe-Inspiring Refulgence has been shanghaied, yes, I shall use strong language, kidnapped, I say, with murderous intent, from a mission of vital importance, I could well say of galactic implications, namely the regu-

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lation of the quiggsharfen trade, at such a time it is no time to waste time staring at insignificant stars!"

"I don't recall that you were even supposed to be on this boat," clipped Newhouse.

"That has nothing to do with it!" yelled Arsang, turning saffron.

Teresina overcame shyness enough to say, "Yes, it does seem strange. Someone must have wanted to get rid of one of us. I mean, isn't that probable? Maybe?"

Newhouse bowed. "It's impossible that anyone could have wanted to be rid of you, Miss Fabian," he purred.

"Now wait," said Kamala Chatterji. Her voice and the dark aristocratic face seemed unusually down-to-earth. (No, not that, thought Teresina; no such luck.) "The point is well taken. It is hard to see why anyone would do such a thing, except to eliminate a person expected to be on this lifeboat. From civilization, at least, if not from the present plane of existence. That leaves out Mr. Arsang and Mr. Newhouse as intended victims; they only came aboard at the last minute."

"Me?" Marie Quesnay shrugged. "No one would get so angry with one little spaceship stewardess, *n'est-ce-pas?* Or if so—ah, I do remember one Raoul in Marseilles, that was the episode of excitement!—he would surely not elect this cold-blooded means." She nodded at Teresina. "Are you not in a like situation, Ma'm'selle Fabian?"

Teresina nodded back, ruefully. "Even more so." She wondered with a certain wistfulness how girls got involved in the episodes of excitement. She had been snowbound with a boy in a ski cabin once, when they were about fifteen, but he had been so terrified of her they scarcely exchanged a word. Then there was her present dilemma, but to date it had only involved sitting in a cushioned recoil chair.

"And Ma'm'selle Trumbull," continued Marie.

"Well," simpered Hedwig, "I won't say there haven't been men who might—"

"But not with all this sabotage and danger to innocent people. It would be so much simpler to stuff you out an airlock," said Marie rather yearningly.

All eyes moved to Fred, who blushed and murmured, "Oh, now!"

"I don't believe I remember your name," said Hedwig.

"Fred."

"What?"

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"Fred. A perfectly good name in the language of my nation. Why shouldn't it be?" His annoyance moderated, Fred continued: "I am a citizen of the Gombar Road. My world we call Kefflach. It is the second planet of the star Groombridge 1830."

"And were you on some important mission?" asked Newhouse.

"I certainly was!" Fred erected his comb and switched his tufted tail. "I was studying Terrestrial poetry."

"Oh."

"You don't understand. At our last national election, the Poetic Party won a clear victory. The Prosaicists retained hardly a dozen saddles in the Assembly."

"Even so—" Newhouse looked back to Kamala with rather more pleasure. "That seems to leave you, Miss Chatterji."

The Indian girl frowned, thoughtful rather than disturbed. "I cannot make logic out of that proposition," she said.

"Speaking about propositions—" Newhouse shut his mouth hastily.

"My family in Calcutta has money," went on Kamala, "but what is the use of kidnapping me with no prospect of returning me? I am engaged in missionary work for the Inner Reformist movement, but that is not likely to arouse fanatical opposition, since one of our major tenets is that all creeds are equally acceptable."

"But there must be some reason—" began Marie.

"Indeed," said Kamala, ignoring her, "creed is irrelevant, except in the universals common to all, such as charity and peace of self. We do, to be sure, rely on the much misunderstood concept of Nirvana, but in somewhat the same sense as Zen Buddhism, in fact still more so, and hence our ideal of oneness with reality is by no means incompatible with, say, Judaeo-Christo-Moslem eschatology, Hindu poly-pantheism, Confucian—"

"I see," interrupted Newhouse.

"—ethics, and so on. You certainly do not see, and since there are, as you say, days to wait before we approach our destination, you all have an unparalleled opportunity to attain a degree of enlightenment. Now to begin with first principles, consider—"

The star had changed from a point of light to a blaze when Newhouse switched over to sublight primary drive. He locked himself in the pilot's

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turret and forbade interruptions, though it would take some hours to close in on the possibly Terrestroid planet his instruments had registered.

Teresina leaned back wearily and stared at a blank wall. It had been a bad ten days. In retrospect it hazed into a nightmare of monotony and petty bickering. Were it not for Marie, who organized enough activities to keep thought at bay, God knew what would have happened. Now, though, nothing remained but a waiting and the hope that someone's overloaded nerves wouldn't snap.

Such as my own, thought Teresina.

Tension led to silence, and silence was a blessing she had never fully appreciated before. Not even Arsang was as bad as that eternal female clack-clack-clack. Fred's bass and Newhouse's baritone had been such a relief she could have wept to listen. It was wonderful, she reflected, that men had deep voices. Otherwise the human race would long ago have died out . . . She choked off that train of thought in a hurry, jumped back to her Wisconsin girlhood (no, that wouldn't do either, it brought the tears too close to the surface), her college and the intoxication of really learning, the times they sat up all night drinking beer and settling the problems of the universe, the unbelievable day when notification came, she could go to Xenophon University for a year, teach, study, see a new planet and get paid for doing so— It all seemed wonderful then.

And now what? Teresina plugged astrographical statistics into the laws of probability. The usual cheerless answer came out. The star ahead definitely had planets. There was a reasonably good chance that one would lie in a more or less Terrestroid radiation zone. (But a few degrees of average temperature either way could make for frightful danger and discomfort.) The chance was not bad that it would be of roughly Earth's mass. (However, the long-range effects of a gravity or air pressure different by more than, say, 25 per cent from that for which man was evolved, were not pleasant to contemplate.) There was a fair probability of protoplasmic, photo-synthesizing life, leading to an oxy-nitrogen atmosphere. Granted such a biochemistry, there was a smaller likelihood that it would be close enough to her own so that she could walk

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around freely and eat most of the native species.

The trouble was, mathematical law is so inconsiderate as to decree that such probabilities must be multiplied together to get a net result. That still left quite a few planets hospitable to man, even in this one arm of the galaxy. But the individual chance of stumbling on one was somewhere below a single percent.

Wherefore the lifeboat would doubtless make a hasty survey and then start out again for another star; and after that another, and then another; and finally the supplies would all be eaten, though the searchers would have gone crazy long before then—

I will not *think this way.* Teresina thrust out a small firm chin and began a resolute mental integration of log log arc tan $(x^3 - k)$ dx.

Marie, beside her, smiled wryly and made a thumbs-up sign. "*Bon,*" she murmured.

And the hours passed. Teresina had almost dozed off when Newhouse's voice came from the intercom to jar her conscious: "We're very close to the planet— No, stay where you are. I can't be bothered now, it's dangerous. I'm making a tight approach curve, taking readings as I go. Don't get your hopes up too much, but it's definitely Earth-like. Mass, surface gravity, gross atmospheric composition; mean overall temperature a little higher, but the subarctic regions should be ideal for—"

"I want to see!" Hedwig leaped to her feet.

"No, I said!" cried Newhouse. "There's something wrong, a flutter in the meter readings. I didn't want to scare you by admitting it, but there is. I haven't the engineering skill to—I'm going to land. It's either that or risk hanging in orbit with a burned-out primary."

"Is it civilized?" whistled Arsang. "I do not mean, is it civilized to hang in orbit, for certainly that is not the case. Nor do I ask if the place itself is civilized, since I know that the United States of Korlaband has no extraplanetary colonies. But do you see any trace of intelligent life?"

"No interstellar colonists," said Newhouse. "The neutrino detector would register their atomic energy plant if that were the case. I haven't seen anything in the viewscreens either—no trace of native culture— Our path will carry us clear around the globe and I'll

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keep watching. But I'm afraid the chances are against any highly developed autochthones."

"Just to set down, though," whispered Teresina. "To get outdoors!"

"And we will still have the boat," Marie reminded eagerly. "If we can establish a base here, we can make expeditions to other stars, hoping in time to find—"

"If the boat hangs together!" Newhouse's voice harshened. "I don't want to frighten you, but the deeper we get into this gravity field, the more the meters are fluttering. Perhaps our saboteur was more thorough than I realized."

"Ohhh!" shrieked Hedwig.

"Do be quiet," said Kamala. "How can our pilot have the requisite inner peace to land successfully under such a handicap, if you fail to show confidence in him?"

"Oh, I'm confident enough in him, dearie," blubbered Hedwig. "It's the machinery that I don't trust."

Kamala frowned. "It is true," she admitted, "that a means of giving inward serenity to a machine has not yet been discovered."

Presently a thin keening sounded through the walls. It became a roar, and Teresina felt waves of frictional heat. Pseudograv could not smooth out all the jerking and buffetting which rocked the boat. "I know it's a lousy landing!" Newhouse called once, raggedly. "But the primary drive is going to pieces! I haven't any more control over the phasing!"

And then at last there was an impact which smacked teeth together, a blunt roar, a scorched smell, and silence.

A wide green valley, where flowers nodded in grass and trees murmured under a gentle wind, swept past a river to forested hills. The sun was a wheel of gold, low in a sky blue and dizzyingly tall, white clouds scudded, birds were a brightness that swooped and darted overhead. Distantly could be seen a herd of animals slender and burning red, with proud horns.

Teresina sighed. "It could almost be Wisconsin."

"Long ago, however," added Fred. "Back when the great pullulating, or perhaps ululating, tide of America which I, Fred of Groombridge 1830 II, sing, had not yet swept west, O pioneers!"

"I know it's wrong of me," said Teresina. "I should be frightened or miserable or something, if only on Mother's

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and Dad's account." She shook her yellow tresses loose to the wind. "But I'm happy!" After a moment she decided: "I suppose it's due to the exercise and fresh air."

They topped a long ridge and saw the spaceboat flash metallic below them. John Jacob Newhouse came hurrying as the girl and the Kefflachian strode downward. His hair was rumpled and his shirt stained with grease. "What kept you?" he puffed. "I was about to organize a search party. I thought you two were only going to look around a little."

"We did," said Teresina, "and it's unbelievably beautiful. Fertile, too. If they're only edible, we'll have more nuts and berries and wild grains and game than they have in Wisconsin."

"They are. I've had the analyzers from our survival kit working hard," said Newhouse. "Naturally, we'll want to test an individual specimen of everything before eating it; and doubtless we'll need a larger variety of foods here than we would on Earth, to get all the vitamins and so on. But it's already obvious that this is our kind of biochemistry."

Fred rolled small devout eyes downward. The gods of the Gombar Road are chthonic. "A miracle," he said.

Newhouse caught Teresina's hands. "But you were gone so long!" he protested.

"Oh?" The girl felt confused. "I didn't have a watch . . . No, it can't be. The sun has hardly moved."

"2° 36′ 14″," said Fred.

Newhouse started. "What? Can you gauge it that close?"

"Why, of course," said the Groombridgean, astonished. "Can't everybody?"

"You've been away more than four hours," said Newhouse, turning back to the girl.

"Good Euler! I must have—" Teresina realized Newhouse was still holding her hands. She jerked them back. Angrily: "I don't see what difference it makes to you!"

"Ah, much, my dear." The man smiled and fell into step with her. "We must all stick close together now. Very close."

"I'm sure Fred could have handled anything dangerous."

"Quite likely." Newhouse ran an approving eye along the gigantic centauroid form.

"We're going to be glad that Mr. Fred is with us. We'll need his strength."

"What do you—Wait!" Ter-

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esina stopped dead. The blood seemed to drain from her. "Do you mean the boat—"

"Beyond repair," sighed Newhouse. "The central polyphasic of the primary drive has been so mangled we were lucky to get down before it blew out altogether. We've no facilities for making a replacement, even if any of us knew how."

"But—I mean—the secondary—"

"It's all right. That does us no good now, though. You must know we can't try quantum-jumping a mass as great as a spaceboat, or a man, faster than light, when we're this deep in a gravitational field. Not unless we want to commit suicide. And without a primary, we can't get off the ground and into space." Newhouse paused a moment, then added: "The radio is sabotaged too."

"But—why—"

"The saboteur, of course. Whoever wanted to get rid of one of us. Wrecking the radio was an added precaution. If we landed safely on a planet where we could live . . . as we've done, in defiance of probability . . . we might have a faint hope that a search party would come past. The chances are all against that, you realize. No one will know which way we headed; there are so many stars; our *prima facie* chance of survival was so small that they won't spend much time looking. But if we had a radio, we could keep it tuned, and if ever we picked up a signal, we could answer. Now even that tiny possibility has been eliminated. Suppose a rescue vessel should chance on this planet, what is the likelihood of its detecting a flyspeck like our camp by visual means?"

Teresina closed her eyes. When she opened them again, the landscape was blurred for a while.

Fred, who seemed more phlegmatic than most humans, except where poetry was concerned, rumbled calmly: "Is there any trace of native civilization, Mr. Newhouse?"

"I saw nothing in the viewscreens that looked like a road or a city or even like cultivated fields," replied the officer. "If anything exists, it must be on a low paleolithic level, no use to us. We're on our own."

"What conditions can we expect?"

"Favorable. I took care to land in an area whose climate would be good for our type of life. It's near the vernal equi-

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nox, so we have summer ahead of us. But as the axial tilt is only some 10 degrees, even the winter will be mild, little more than a rainy season. As you've seen, this world rotates very slowly, the period is more than three Terrestrial weeks. But the nights won't be terribly dark, even if there isn't a moon. This is a rather thickly starred region of space, a loose cluster. Also, we're in a high latitude, the planet has a strong magnetic field, and it's closer to its sun than Earth—so we can expect some brilliant auroral displays the year 'round. In short, we'll be able to see what we're about after sunset. And as I said, we'll have no trouble about food. We'll practice agriculture, but won't have to work unduly hard at it."

"Have we tools?"

"Yes, a good assortment, including some guns. Terrestrial seeds, too, in biostatic containers. Regulation survival equipment. Though as far as I know, this is the first time any tourists have ever had need of it."

They were close to the boat now. Newhouse waved at the others. Marie, fed up with the petulant incompetence of Hedwig and Arsang, had taken a hatchet and chopped some firewood herself; Kamala had a small blaze going, and the smell from a kettle suspended above was savory. Teresina realized with a jolt how hungry she was.

"We can bunk in the craft as long as need be," said Newhouse, "but of course we'd like more space and comfort. Tomorrow—I mean later today, local time!—suppose we set up the crane and the power saw. We can erect a very comfortable log cabin, with a private room for everybody, in a week or so. Next sunrise we can begin some basic farming. Why, in a few months we'll all be living like kings!"

"What kind of kings?" asked Fred suspiciously. "I know some tribes on Kefflach who sacrifice the king every harvest season."

"Oh," said Newhouse, "it was only a figure—"

"Not to mention those which have been infected with republicanism and are starting revolutions against their monarchies."

"—a figure of speech—"

"And then there is the King of the Venruth Way. He's always in debt. He can't walk two steps without some moneylender seizing him by

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the tail and demanding repayment."

"Forget it!"

"And poor old King Horrok of the Jungar Trail. He's expected to lead his warriors in battle, and he's *such* a coward, and the expensive psychiatrist he imported from Earth got so interested in the symbolism of a nomadic civilization that—"

"Never mind! Never mind!"

"Is it any wonder that I sing the spaciousness of Democracy, I, Fred, contained in all and all-containing, warm and unwashed as the veritable mob?"

Suddenly Teresina giggled.

Life looked more hopeful after a sleep period. The sun remained at late afternoon, the same low winds blew the same woolly clouds, but grief, anger, and hysterics were over with. It was almost a calm group which met outside the boat when breakfast was done.

Newhouse mounted the second rung of the access ladder and looked down on the others, who sat or stood in tree-shaded grass. He made a dashing figure, his hair rumpled by the breeze, shirt open, pants skin-tight above gleaming boots. Teresina suspected he had put in half an hour or better achieving the effect. At least, that was the only way she could account for the riding boots, on a planet without horses.

"Ladies and gentlebeings," said Newhouse in his most vibrant voice. "You know now that we're probably here for the rest of our lives. You know how lucky we've been in finding such a Garden of Eden as this. It's up to us to deserve that luck, to be worthy of the human race."

"And the Numan race," piped Arsang.

"Of course," said Newhouse, annoyed. "I wasn't forgetting the Kefflachian race either. But, well, anyhow, to continue. We can make what we will of this planet. Right now we're a community with no definite authority, no clear-cut legal rights, no . . . uh . . . anything. We have work to do. It won't be back-breaking. We have basic power tools, and the boat's converter will supply all the energy we can ever use. But it will be work. A challenge!" he cried, trumpet-like.

"You needn't shout," said Kamala. "We are not deaf."

Newhouse looked disconcerted, smoothed it over, and resumed swiftly: "We have to agree, maybe not on anything as elaborate as a constitution,

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but on a few rules. The way we start will determine the tradition, the whole structure, of our society in the future. Our descendants can bless us or curse us—"

"*Une pause!*" Marie leaped to her feet. "What is that it is that which you say? Whose descendants?"

Newhouse folded his arms, leaned back against the ladder, and smiled. "Ours. Yours and the other ladies'. And mine."

"Ohhh!" quavered Hedwig pinkly.

Teresina jumped up also. "Now wait a minute, Newhouse!" she yelled, and stopped, appalled at her own boldness.

"You know the law," said the officer.

"What law?" asked Kamala through an otherwise stunned silence.

"Number 298376, Statutes of the United Commonwealths," said Newhouse.

The girl shook her dark head. "I never heard of it, and my father has held a seat in Parliament since—"

"Popularly known as the Reproductive Act."

"No, I can't say—"

Teresina exchanged glances with Marie. The stewardess shrugged and made a face. Who could keep track of all the laws there were?

"I imagine it isn't too familiar to civilians at that," said Newhouse. "Spacemen are of course very much aware of it, though even in their case the issue seldom arises. But, briefly, the law requires that Terrestrial citizens cast away on any planet where reproduction is at all practical must reproduce, and in such a way as to assure the greatest distribution of all available sound heredity."

Teresina shrank back against the comforting bulk of Fred. Newhouse swept a grin across her.

"But this is outrageous!" screamed Hedwig Trumbull. "Indecent!"

"Conditions in space don't always permit the same behavior as at home," said Newhouse blandly. "The law has several purposes. First, since any band of castaways is sure to be small, inbreeding has to be avoided as much as possible, lest the descendants start degenerating in a century or two. There has to be as much genetic variety made available as circumstances allow: interbreeding in all individual combinations. Second, by enforcing reproduction, the law makes use even of disasters like this one to spread civi-

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lization throughout the galaxy. By the time our world is discovered, for instance, there may be quite a flourishing colony. Third, it's for your own protection. Do you want to be the last survivor, growing old with no one to take care of you?"

"But—mariages—" objected Kamala.

"They're all automatically annulled," said Newhouse, "though all children born are automaticaly legitimate."

"Somehow," complained Arsang, "the logic of this escapes me."

"Anyway, none of us are married." Newhouse leered. "Yet."

"I will not do it!" exploded Marie. "You—*jeune bouc!*" When he didn't seem impressed, she translated: "Young goat."

The officer said sternly: "There's a severe penalty for non-compliance, Miss Quesnay."

"But I thought no one was going to rescue us," said Teresina.

"If we are rescued, the penalties will apply. Besides . . . well, let's face it, I am the only man for God knows how many parsecs." Newhouse buffed his nails on his shirt, regarded them critically, and smiled again.

"It's outrageous!" Hedwig waddled toward him, shaking her fists. "It's indecent, I say, immoral, improper! When do you start?"

Newhouse's composure melted a little. "Oh," he said.

Hedwig fluffed her green hair, revealing gray roots. "I want it known that I am complying only under protest," she said. "Furthermore, if we should be rescued, you must make an honest woman of me, that *is* understood."

"Well," said Newhouse, jumping down from the ladder and backing away, "let's not be hasty. I, er, didn't want to embarrass any of you ladies. I know you'll, uh, need time to get used to this. To the idea. I'll t-t-talk to you separately . . . later. . . ."

"Don't think I am afraid," said Hedwig. "I am prepared to do my duty to civilization, however distasteful."

"Fred," gabbled Newhouse, "we'd better start unloading those power tools. Right away."

Since there was nothing obviously dangerous in the neighborhood, Teresina was handed a light rifle just in case and a basket for specimens of potential edibles, to be brought back and analyzed. She was out for some hours,

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more grateful to be alone than she dared admit.

Returning through the sun-spattered shade of a little wood, bird song overhead and soft leaf mould underfoot, she felt tired enough to put down alertness. She had plenty of samples, no reason to keep an eye out for more. But that, she soon discovered, was a mistake: she began thinking about her own situation.

It looked bleaker by the minute. You could make this damned planet as idyllic as you liked, it was still a jail. She had thought herself asocial, not really unfriendly but fonder than average of curling up with a book in the evening. She had imagined her own interests were centered on analysis situs and the theory of equations. Only now did she realize how much she had been a part of society—how much everyone is—from tea-time chitchat to night-long argument, from stranger in the street to lifetime friend—and the whole structure of society, not so much its buildings and machines as its books, paintings, concerts . . . Great Lagrange! She thought of herself as a mathematician, but without a reference library and at least one monthly journal she *wasn't*. . . . She shivered in the knowledge.

Camping and hiking and so on, she thought with a swing back from terror to resentment, were fun as a hobby. As a career, they had no appeal.

A rustling ahead made her snatch for the rifle. "Hey, what have I done?" grinned Newhouse, emerging from a screen of brush.

Teresina slung the weapon back over her shoulder. "What are you doing?" she blurted. Her heart didn't stop jumping.

"Is that a shift of emphasis?" He fell into step beside her. "Why, we called it a day, or work period, or whatever the term is under these crazy conditions, back at the camp. So I thought I'd stroll out and see if I could meet you."

Teresina's face burned. "It's a big area. The chances were against finding me."

"I'm a great one for lopping the odds," chuckled Newhouse. He tapped a small instrument hung at his belt. "You are carrying an energy compass, one that will pick up the weak steady emission from the boat's converter. I simply tuned this one to yours. Ahem! Speaking of pick-ups—"

"Why—What. . . ."

"Why? You yourself are the answer to that." Newhouse

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slipped an arm about her waist.

Teresina jerked free. "Stop that!"

He laughed aloud, not in the least abashed. "All right, I won't be the big bad wolf. Not yet. Though if I chose to be, there wouldn't be much you could do about it, would there?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, as I've remarked before, I'm the only human male around. And you are not a girl who'd defy the law."

"Oh." Teresina looked away. "The law."

Newhouse moved up behind her. "Don't be bitter. Am I so horrible?"

Teresina struggled to speak. She still faced away from him when she got out: "No."

"Ah," said Newhouse and laid his hands on her waist.

Teresina continued, word by dogged word: "It isn't personal. Not much. It's the, the general idea of it all."

"Now, wait," purred Newhouse, nuzzling her hair. "Don't fool yourself. I know the female of our species fairly well, if I do say so, and I could tell right away you aren't cold. Reserved, a bluestocking type, sure, but underneath everything, very much a woman."

Teresina stared down rustling leafy arches. "I always expected to get married," she said. She could only think how hard it was to talk so freely about herself to a near stranger. The subject matter seemed almost irrelevant by contrast. "Yes, of course. But I meant *married.*"

"If it's that you're worried about, I've explained the law—"

"Yes, and of all the stupid, vicious laws there ever were . . . I'm not interested in what some damned Act of Parliament says. I was talking about marriage. A relationship between me and one man, for all our lives; something that was ours alone. I don't mean I'd be possessive. I hope not. But, well, I suppose I am a monogamist."

"However, since things have worked out otherwise—" Newhouse snuggled her close against him. "What was it George Bernard Shaw wrote, centuries ago?" he said complacently. "A woman would rather have part of a superior man than all of an inferior one."

"What?"

"Being the only man, I think I can safely call myself superior. Believe me, lass, I'd far rather have been abandoned alone with you. But

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even as it is, we could get quite abandoned, the two of us—"

Teresina realized, like a fist in her stomach, how she was being held. She tried to jerk free. Newhouse laughed again and held her tightly. She couldn't break away. He swung her around to face him and lowered his lips toward hers.

She smacked his nose with her forehead.

He let go and staggered back, gasping. She unlimbered her rifle. "I don't want to shoot you," she choked. "Please don't make me." Hastily: "I mean, please don't force me to shoot!"

Newhouse dabbed at his nose. "Put that thing away," he groaned. "You want to commit murder?"

Her pulse hammered, but she felt an upsurge of strength and self-command, i.e., adrenalin. "And what you were about to commit?" she snapped.

"My lawful duty," said Newhouse with as great an air of virtue as possible when one has a nosebleed.

"To hell with that bleat," said Teresina, surprising herself. "To hell with that law, also. Do you think I'm so afraid of lonesomeness, now or in my old age, that I'll sign up in your harem? Give me one good reason why I should help perpetuate *your* chromosomes!"

"The survival of this community," said Newhouse primly.

Teresina remembered a coarse Anglo-Saxon monosyllable she had encountered a few times on Earth. Experimentally, she pronounced it. Newhouse looked so delightfully shocked that she said it again. "Whatever bunch of old women in trousers wrote that law," she added, "they must be pretty abject not to have thought that survival isn't worth just any price whatsoever. Enough is enough, for Gauss' sake. Now, git!"

She jerked the rifle. Newhouse stumbled from her. He paused at the edge of a thicket. "What are you going to do?" he asked weakly.

"I'll come back to camp," said Teresina, "after I've cooled off. We needn't say any more about this episode."

Newhouse stood thinking for a moment. "I apologize," he said. "I didn't understand you as well as I thought."

"I suggest you be a little less confident you understand the others."

"But there is still the law.

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And our group is basically law-abiding. If nothing else, they won't risk the penalties of compounding a felony, if we should be rescued; and that's what they'd be guilty of, if they allowed you to be this obstinate."

Teresina flung back so fast that only later did she have time to admire her own intelligence: "We can argue about that later. The law says this group has to reproduce. All right. It says nothing about the order in which we do so. In fact, it wouldn't be sensible to have all the women pregnant simultaneously. Very well, Mr. Newhouse, you can start elsewhere. When the first infant is well on its way, the issue will arise for the rest of us."

He gaped. "Elsewhere?"

"I suggest Hedwig Trumbull," sneered Teresina. "She seemed quite prepared to give her all for the colony."

Recognizing a perfect exit line, she turned her back on his appalled stare and marched off.

The slow sunset came during the next work period. For hours the sky burned red and hot gold. But while Teresina had always regretted the swift fading of such beauty on Earth, she found it rather monotonous when it lasted half her waking time. Blue twilight, the earliest stars blinking to life, was downright welcome.

The party sat outside, under floodlamps rigged near the site of their planned house, and talked. Mostly it was reminiscence, Earth, friends, and do you think we'll ever see home again, until Hedwig began to snivel. Then Marie called rather sharply for a discussion of practical problems. Labor around the boat could continue through the long night, but it was best to suspend hunting and gathering operations. However, it would also be well to venture a ways into the forest, get some idea what to expect there after dark. Fred and Newhouse could . . . no, Newhouse must not be risked . . . Fred agreed amiably to do some exploring alone. He had little to fear. Teresina offered to accompany him. Newhouse vetoed it: she must not hazard her own germ plasm unnecessarily. Teresina bridled, spoke of her rights as an individual, and was dismayed when the others sided with Newhouse. Only Arsang voted for her, and that chiefly in a spiteful mood. He had been told off to gather berries earlier that session, and did not think it ac-

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corded with the dignity of a Lord High Gongbeater.

Presently they all went to bed. Automatic alarms had been set up; there was no need to stand watches. Teresina noted maliciously that Newhouse was still retiring alone to his bunk in the boat. Hedwig made an insinuating remark, but he brushed very quickly past her and the door to the pilot turret was heard to slam shut. Arsang and Hedwig entered the passenger section, the rest preferred to stretch sleeping bags out in the mild night. All but Fred, of course: nothing could be done but hang blankets over him.

Teresina couldn't fall asleep. After an hour or two of twisting in the sack, she got up, donned sandals and cloak, and wandered toward camp limits.

It was now approaching true night. The sky was purple-black overhead. Stars crowded it in great blazing strings and clusters; this was indeed a fairly dense region of space; white auroral shimmers leaped noiselessly between the foreign constellations. Even without a moon, she could see how dew glittered in the grass, how the river flashed some kilometers off and the remote hills shouldered upward. She could hear more noises than in the daytime, rustlings, patterings, whistlings, croakings, warblings, nocturnal life up and about its business. She thought vaguely that the daylight and starlight species must be more sharply divided here, more specialized, than on Earth . . . Strange that a planet otherwise so homelike should have so lazy a rotation. True, its sun was closer, tidal drag would operate. But that could not even affect the spin as much as Luna had slowed Earth: especially since this world was hardly older than her own and probably younger. Sol is rather old as Population One goes. The planet appeared to have no satellite, certainly none big enough to create significant drag. The normal distribution of angular momentum would presumably guarantee any moonless planet, not too close to its primary, a rotation period of no more than, say, a hundred hours. So what had slowed this globe down? . . . But its long luminous night was beautiful.

A closer sound brought Teresina whirling about. For a moment, in the vague tricky light, she stared terrified at a pair of tall black trolls. Then

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they resolved themselves into Marie Quesnay and Kamala Chatterji, also cloaked.

"Hello," said Teresina, a little shakenly. The big darkness made all voices seem a whisper. "So you can't sleep either?"

"Why, are you suffering from insomnia, my dear?" asked Kamala. "I only came out to admire the view. While total inner peace is not easily attained, I can show you a simple relaxation technique which—"

"It is not to make the matter," interrupted Marie. "I too was tossing wakeful, and when I noticed you leave, Kamala, I got up and joined you. Then we saw you, Teresina."

"But if you will only," said the Indian girl, "begin by drawing a deep breath—"

"I do not—"

"—eleven times repeated, standing on your toes; then sit down, put your head between your thighs, cross your ankles—"

"I do not want to sleep!" exclaimed Marie. "It is that I have the thinking to do."

"Well, then I should not disturb you," said Kamala. "Good night."

"No, stay here. And you, Teresina. It is the thinking we must all do, and we may as well talk it over now, *hein?*"

The cool breeze caressed Teresina's face and sizzled. She said lamely: "You mean . . . the problem of—"

"Of that *cochon* Newhouse, yes." Marie bit off her words. "He has made the pass at you too, no?"

"No. I mean yes. But I had a gun along, and—"

"And I know a few judo arts," said Marie. "In my work, that is always needful. Did he get you alone, Kamala?"

"Yes," answered the Indian girl serenely. "I discoursed to him on the Three Principles. I was starting to develop the Five Basic Philosophies from them when he said we had better get back to camp."

Marie giggled, "That is the easy way out, that."

"I told him," said Teresina, glad the darkness hid her embarrassment, "that he could, er, well, start with someone who was willing."

"And I the same," nodded Marie. "I think we both suggested the same person, no? Since his interest in her is, shall we say, not great, he is so far doing nothing." She shrugged. "But that will not last long, *mes amies*. He is a healthy young man, healthier

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than average in some respects. If nothing else, he will follow our proposal. And then, a few months hence, he will have—a'em!—clear title to one of us."

"Just let him dare!" flared Teresina.

Kamala said gently: "He will have the extraterrestrials on his side. They will certainly desire a large community here, especially as a provision for their own old age. And there is the question of law, and even of duty."

"Duty! Law!" Teresina looked out to the river. Finally she spoke, hard-voiced:

"Has it occurred to you just how bad and stupid that law is? Go down the line, tick off the points one by one. First, it's a gross infringement of civil liberties. People have the constitutional right to decide what they'll make of their own lives. An enforced marriage isn't legally a marriage at all. Second, this kind of situation is so wildly improbable that there's no reason for a law regulating it. How sloppy are space crews supposed to be, anyhow? There's almost no excuse for getting marooned. Even explorers, Survey ships, don't head into the wild black yonder. They identify in advance the stars they're going to visit, using astronomical telescopes. If they aren't back within a reasonable time, a rescue expedition will know where to search!"

"True," said Marie. "Although I am surprised that you, a civilian, know so much about Survey procedure."

"I don't, really," confessed Teresina. "I only reasoned it out, on the basic assumption that space explorers aren't stupid."

"Well," said Kamala, "this is indeed an unnecessary law, as you point out. But that sort of thing is not unknown. There are many regulations providing for the weirdest contingencies. For example, in one of the American states, I have heard it is illegal to take a bath by the side of the highway on Sunday mornings. So a law regulating castaways is not out of the pattern, even if I have never heard of a situation like ours arising before."

"All right," said Teresina. "Conceded. Fermat knows what will happen when an M.P. gets the bit between his teeth. But let's take this law at face value. It's supposed to guarantee that castaways of mixed sexes will reproduce, if at all possible. Really—" she felt herself blush again, but plowed stubbornly on—"do

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you think that has to be *required?*

"The law is also supposed to prevent degeneration by enforcing the greatest outbreeding. Well, after all! I mean, if a band of people are so stupid they can't think of that for themselves, it doesn't matter if they degenerate or not, does it? They don't need to get all promiscuous in the first generation to take care of the genetic drift. All they have to do is regulate who their children and grandchildren marry, make marriage contracts between families. And that's been common practice throughout human history. Our modern custom of leaving it entirely up to the individual is the statistical abnormality."

"Hmm, yes," said Marie. "I can also see that if there were several couples shipwrecked together, and they were supposed to change partners all the time, *oui*, the emotional tensions that could make would be more dangerous than any genetic problems!"

"And then, that—" Teresina tried her Anglo-Saxon again. It seemed to fit, so she let it stand and continued: "—about spreading civilization. Really! If a planet has no natives, it can wait till it's discovered in the usual way. If it does have natives, can you imagine how much trouble a band of aliens like us, calmly filling their land with our own offspring, would make? The explorers who finally did arrive would probably find a full-fledged war waiting for them. In fact, what the law ought to do is forbid reproduction, till the castaways are sure there aren't any aborigines!"

She fell silent. The wind murmured and the forest talked in the night.

Kamala said at last, "You are right, dear, it is a most ridiculous piece of legislation, and if I ever get home I shall certainly have my father introduce a bill to repeal it. But meanwhile—"

"Meanwhile," said Marie as Kamala's voice trailed off, "we have the situation as it is. Forget about the law. We have one man, four women, and no chance of rescue. I am afraid we shall have to agree with what he wants." Wryly: "As you say, the law it is not necessary at all."

"We don't have to!" cried Teresina.

Marie shrugged again. "I do not like M'sieur Newhouse very much. I will not fall into his arms at once. But sooner or later, *eh, bien,* I am a

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healthy animal myself. And so are you two."

"I am not!" Teresina stamped her foot.

Kamala laughed. Teresina said awkwardly, "Well, I mean, I have some self-discipline."

"We all do, now," said Marie. "A year from now? Two years? Five? I have perhaps seen a little more of the life than you, *chérie*. If nothing else, you will not deny yourself children. And it is true, the community will need those children fifty years from now. You must not be selfish."

"You can delay the inevitable for some months," said Kamala. "During that time, I shall instruct you in Inner Reform. These things will seem much less important then."

"Don't you care?" choked Teresina.

Kamala hesitated. "There is a young man, in Calcutta . . . I was going to come back to him in a year, and—No!" With more violence than her principles allowed: "Forget it! It is past!"

"Cayley and Sylvester!" snarled Teresina. "If you had any will power whatsoever, you'd help me seize the boat! We could keep looking for a human settlement. Better die trying than give up to this, this cotton candy planet!"

"You forget," said Marie, "the primary drive, she is sabotaged."

"Couldn't we fix it?"

"Not according to what Newhouse says. I have no knowledge of these matters, me. I could fly the boat in atmosphere, but I would not trust myself in space with it."

"What Newhouse says!" rasped Teresina. "How far would you trust that—that—"

"Unintegrated personality," suggested Kamala.

"Cad!" said Teresina.

"Same thing, really," said Kamala.

"We may as well trust in him," said Marie. "He has such luck as never a man in all history. I would rather have a lucky man than a clever one."

"Luck—" Teresina stood as if smitten. Understanding was a thunderbolt.

"All the improbabilities do seem to have operated in his favor," agreed Kamala. "It implies that under his superficially superficial personality there lies some deep unconscious harmony with the All. Yes . . . yes, perhaps I have been unjust to him. I must get to know him better—"

Teresina grabbed Marie's hand. "Did you say you could fly the boat?" she yelled.

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"Yes. A little," said the stewardess. "But what do you —you cannot—"

"The hell I can't!" Teresina whirled and started running downhill. "Come on!"

"Qu'est - que - c'est - que - ça?" gasped Marie. She stood an instant, then followed. "Kamala, help, she is gone *dérangé!"*

Fred roused at the noise and lumbered to meet the girls. "What has happened?" he boomed. "Is anything wrong, little ones?"

"Fred—Fred—" Teresina collapsed shaking against his enormous chest. "Y-y-you don't want to, to, stay here, do you?"

"No. Naturally not. Granted, it is a peaceful scene, but I anticipate an increasing loneliness for my own species. Somehow this planet seems to be lacking in the large, varied, raucous, perspiring qualities of En Masse."

"Well, then, come on!" shrieked Teresina.

Kamala reached her and tugged her arm. "Peace," she urged. "Do be calm, darling. Now just take a long breath."

Marie seized her other arm. "Do you wish a sedative?" she asked.

"I have been studying the recreational microfiles in the boat," Fred rumbled on, "and have decided to take a course of music by Delius and poetry by James Whitcomb Riley."

Steps clanged in the airlock. Newhouse appeared, a pistol in his hand, Hedwig and Arsang behind him. "What is it?" called the man.

"I fear poor Teresina has lost the self-control," said Marie.

"What?" Newhouse hurried down the ladder. After a moment, Hedwig followed. Arsang slithered along, gave the tableau a disdainful look, and began explaining to Hedwig how much better things were regulated at the Prideful Court of H.A.R. Pipp XI.

Newhouse shouldered close. "What happened?" he said.

"She began to shout and run," answered Kamala. "The child is overwrought. Let me talk to her alone for a while and—"

"It isn't so!" wailed Teresina. The world trembled in her sight; the noise of her heart filled it with roaring. "The boat! You lied to us! The boat isn't damaged at all!"

"What?" Newhouse's mouth fell open.

"Listen," babbled Teresina, "listen to me for just one minute!"

Newhouse hefted his pistol.

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"I think she is hysterical," he said. In the wan light, his face was drawn taut. "I'll take her off myself for a chat. I know how to handle these cases."

"No, it is me who have the training," said Marie.

"I'm the captain here!" snapped Newhouse.

Teresina looked at the gun in his fist. It was pointed squarely at her midriff. "Calm down, sweetheart," Newhouse went on. "Be quiet. Relax."

"What is this about the boat?" asked Fred.

"Nothing," said Newhouse. "Nothing at all. Right?" He and his gun looked hard at Teresina.

She never knew where the nerve came from. She kicked upward. Her foot struck his hand. The pistol went soaring off in an arc. Newhouse cursed and ran after it.

Teresina scrambled for the boat. "Come on! Let's go!" she screamed.

Newhouse was on his hands and knees, casting about in the long shadowed grass. Marie threw him a single look and scampered up the ladder. "Fred!" shouted Teresina. The Kefflachian snatched up Kamala and made it into the airlock in one jump.

Teresina was still below. She saw Newhouse straighten, the pistol agleam in his grasp. She had no idea whether he would actually use it or not, but her inwards grew cold and lumpy. Then Fred reached down a monster-long arm and hauled her up. The outer airlock valve clashed shut behind her.

She lay a moment gasping before she could say to Marie: "All right . . . go on to the turret—raise ship quickly . . . no time to waste."

The stewardess looked at the closed valve, as if to watch the scene beyond. "But Hedwig and Arsang," she said. "Alone with him—"

"He won't dare harm them now. If he ever really intended to." Teresina sat up, shivering, hugging her knees. "They have all the supplies and tools and things. It won't hurt them to wait a while."

Unexpectedly, Kamala grinned. "I cannot think of any three persons I would rather see stranded together," she said.

Sir John Baskerville, legal officer (as well as chief chemist, assistant medico, and Masonic lodgemaster) of Irene, only town on the planet Holmes, stared in astonishment at the beautiful blonde girl on the other side of his desk.

"But this is fantastic!" he

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exclaimed. "How did you ever deduce it was a hoax?"

"Oh, everything," said Teresina Fabian. "I mean, the whole sabotage business did seem so unlikely. No one could think of a good reason for it. And clumsy, too! Why not just a bomb in the boat and make sure of us? And then the chances were so grossly against our finding a planet as good as this."

"Thank you," bowed Sir John. "Frankly, we on Holmes agree, though our neighbors and friendly rivals on Watson —But continue."

"Newhouse, being the third officer, could have arranged lifeboat assignments any way he wanted, within limits," said Teresina. "The original party in Fourteen was four young ladies, all unattached, and, well, at least he thought they were attractive. And then Fred, whose strength would be useful and who wouldn't be a rival. Of course, Newhouse's plans were somewhat thrown akilter. First Miss Trumbull traded places with a very cute redhead he had lined up for our boat. Then Arsang forced himself aboard. But that wasn't too serious. He went ahead. It would have been easy for him to put a timer in the ship's alarm circuit, one that would sound the bells when he wanted. He could also have cut off our boat's communication circuit to the ship. He didn't even have to put another timer in our release mechanism—just a thing he could claim was such a device. Naturally, he had to get rid of the navigation manual. Otherwise there wouldn't have been any excuse not to go to a colony. He must have memorized the coordinates of this star and the orbital elements of this planet beforehand. All he had to do, then, was disable the radio and neutrino detector, land in the opposite hemisphere from your settlement, and pretend we were on an undiscovered world."

"Did you know where you were, before coming around to this side and seeing Watson in the sky?" asked Sir John.

Teresina nodded bashfully. "I felt pretty sure of it. Once I suspected it was all a trick, I remembered having heard of a double planet in this neighborhood. And a companion of roughly equal mass is about all which could slow the rotation of a reasonably young world this much. I mean, the companions would always face each other. That accounted for the long day and night, and confirmed my suspicions.

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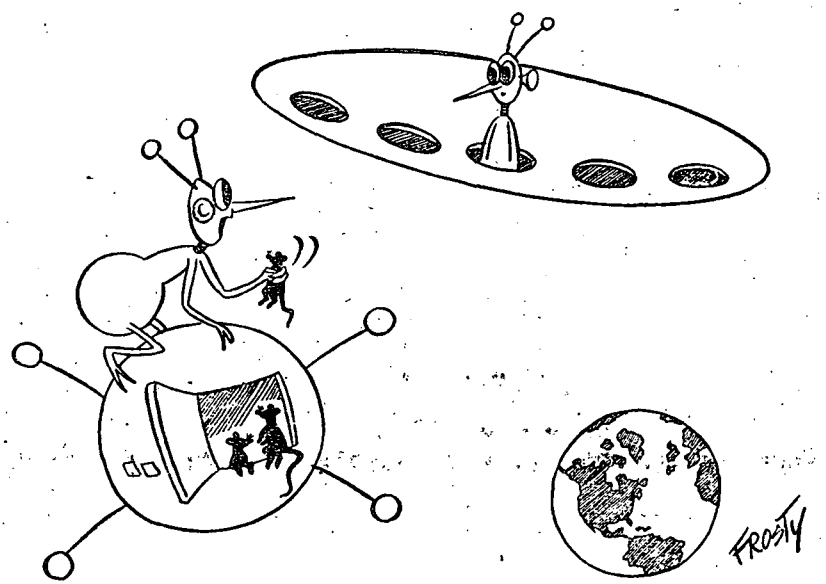
"Well, it followed from all this that the boat hadn't really been sabotaged. And I couldn't believe Newhouse had any intention of playing Robinson Crusoe forever. In a year or two or three, when he got bored, he'd pretend to have fixed the primary drive after all. Then he could discover with great astonishment that there had been a colony here all the time, that we never knew about."

"Or he might have taken you all off 'looking' for a colonial planet and 'happened' to find another," nodded Sir John. "Jotunheim isn't far away. Or he might simply have flown off, leaving all of you in the wilderness. A proper villain, Miss! We shall certainly see that he is punished, when we find him. Though I'm afraid, this planet is so big and our police force so small, it may take weeks to identify your camp."

"No matter." Teresina smiled. "He can stay right where he is. I hope he enjoys every minute of it."

THE END



"I think it must be some kind of mouse extermination program on earth."

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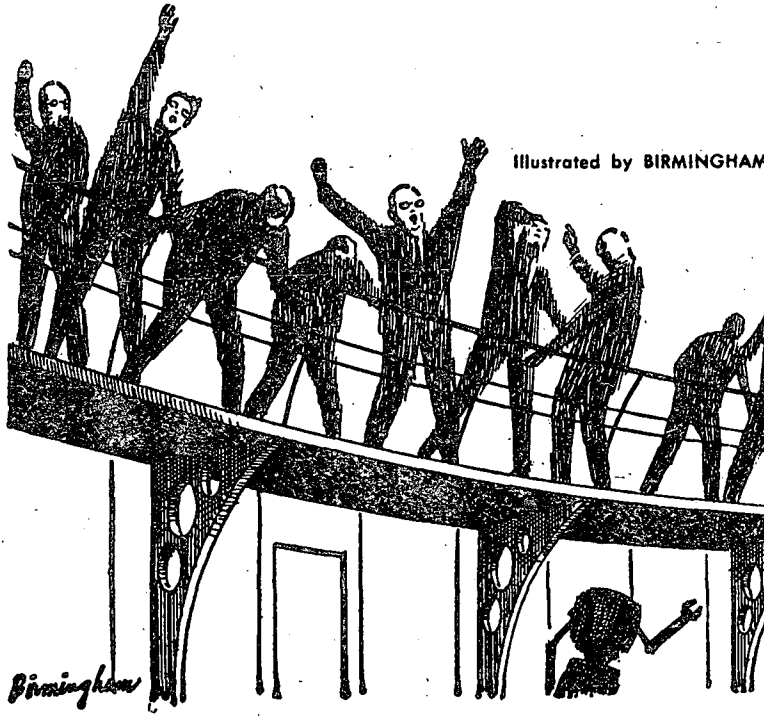
CEREBRUM

By ALBERT TEICHNER

For thousands of years the big brain served as a master switchboard for the thoughts and emotions of humanity. Now the central mind was showing signs of decay . . . and men went mad.

Illustrated by BIRMINGHAM



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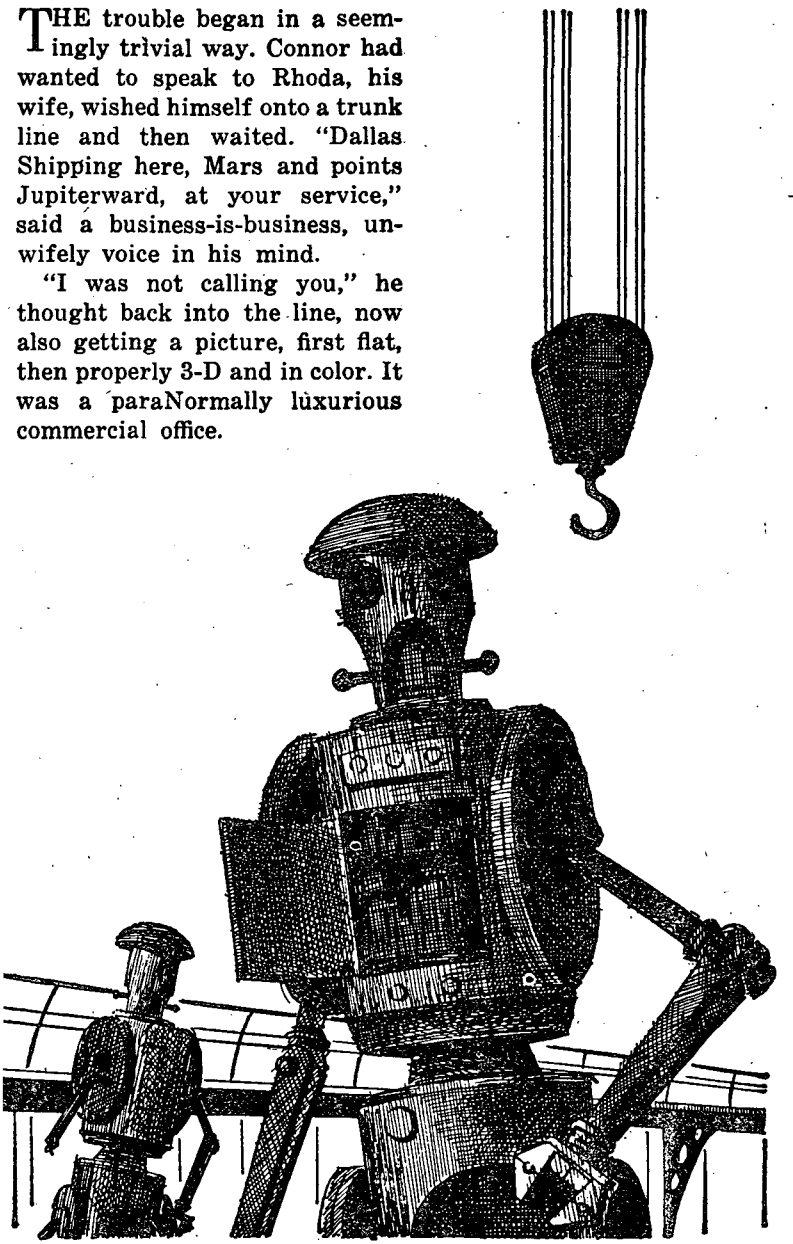
THE trouble began in a seemingly trivial way. Connor had wanted to speak to Rhoda, his wife, wished himself onto a trunk line and then waited. "Dallas Shipping here, Mars and points Jupiterward, at your service," said a business-is-business, unwifely voice in his mind.

"I was not calling you," he thought back into the line, now also getting a picture, first flat, then properly 3-D and in color. It was a paraNormally luxurious commercial office.



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"I am the receptionist at Dallas Shipping," the woman thought back firmly. "You rang and I answered."

"I'm sure I rang right," Connor insisted.

"And I'm sure I know my job," Dallas Shipping answered. "I have received as many as five hundred thought messages a day, some of them highly detailed and technical and—."

"Forget it," snapped Connor. "Let's say I focussed wrong."

He pulled back and twenty seconds later finally had Rhoda on the line. "Queerest thing happened," he projected. "I just got a wrong party."

"Nothing queer about it," his wife smiled, springing to warm life on his inner eye. "You just weren't concentrating, Connor."

"Don't you hand me that too," he grumbled. "I *know* I thought on the right line into Central. Haven't I been using the System for sixty years?"

"Exactly—all habit and no attention."

How smugly soothing she was some days! "I think the trouble's in Central itself. The Switcher isn't receiving me clearly."

"Lately I've had some peculiar miscalls myself," Rhoda said nervously. "But you *can't* blame Central Switching!"

"Oh, I didn't mean that!" By now he was equally nervous and only too happy to end the conversation. Ordinarily communications were not monitored but if this one had been there could certainly be a slander complaint.

ON his way home in the monorail Connor tried to reach his office and had the frightening experience of having his telepathic call refused by Central. Then he refused in turn to accept a call being projected at him, but when an Urgent classification was added he had to take it. "For your unfounded slander of Central Switching's functioning," announced the mechanically-synthesized voice, "you are hereby Suspended indefinitely from the telepathic net. From this point on all paraNormal privileges are withdrawn and you will be able to communicate with your fellow only in person or by written message."

Stunned, Connor looked about at his fellow passengers. Most of them had their eyes closed and their faces showed the mild little smile which was the outer hallmark of a mind at rest, tuned in to a music channel or some other of the hundreds of entertainment lines available from Central. How much he had taken that for granted just a few minutes ago!

Three men, more shabbily dressed, were unsmilingly reading books. They were fellow pariahs, Suspended for one reason or another from paraNormal

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privileges. Only the dullest, lowest-paying jobs were available to them while anyone inside the System could have Central read any book and transmit the information directly into his cortex. The shabbiest one of all looked up and his sympathetic glance showed that he had instantly grasped Connor's changed situation.

Connor looked hastily away; he didn't want any sympathy from that kind of 'human' being! Then he shuddered. Wasn't he, himself, now that kind in every way except his ability to admit it?

When he stepped onto the lushly hydroponic platform at the suburban stop the paraNormals, ordinarily friendly, showed that they, too, already realized what had happened. Each pair of suddenly icy eyes went past him as if he were not there at all.

He walked up the turf-covered lane toward his house, feeling hopelessly defeated. How would he manage to maintain a home here in the middle of green and luxuriant beauty? More people than ever were now outside the System for one reason or another and most of these unfortunates were crowded in metropolitan centers which were slumhells to anyone who had known something better.

How could he have been so thoughtless because of a little lapse in Central's mechanism? Now that it was denied him, probably forever, he saw more clearly the essential perfection of the system that had brought order into the chaos following the discovery of universal paraNormal capacities. At first there had been endless interference between minds trying to reach each other while fighting off unwanted calls. Men had even suggested this blessing turned curse be annulled.

The Central Synaptic Computation Receptor and Transmitter System had ended all such negative thinking. For the past century and a half it had neatly routed telepathic transmissions with an efficiency that made ancient telephone exchanges look like Stone Age toys. A mind could instantly exchange information with any other Subscribing mind and still shut itself off through the Central machine if and when it needed privacy. Except, he shuddered once more, if Central put that Urgent rating on a call. Now only Rhoda could get a job to keep them from the inner slumlands.

He turned into his garden and watched Max, the robot, spading in the petunia bed. The chrysanthemums really needed more attention and he was going to think the order to Max when he realized with a new shock that all orders would have to be oral now.

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He gave up the idea of saying anything and stomped gloomily into the house.

AS he hung his jacket in the hall closet he heard Rhoda coming downstairs. "Queer thing happened today," he said with forced cheerfulness, "but we'll manage." He stopped as Rhoda appeared. Her eyes were red and puffed.

"I tried to reach you," she sobbed.

"Oh, you already know. Well, we can manage, you know, honey. You can work two days a week and—."

"You don't understand," she screamed at him. "*I'm* Suspended too! I tried to tell it I hadn't done anything but it said I was guilty by being associated with you."

Stunned, he fell back into a chair. "Not you, too, darling!" He had been getting used to the idea of his own reduced status but this was too brutal. "Tell Central you'll leave me and the guilt will be gone."

"You fool, I did say that and my defense was refused!"

Tears welled in his eyes. Was there no bottom to this horror? "You yourself suggested that?"

"Why shouldn't I?" she cried. "It wasn't my fault at all."

He sat there and tried not to listen as waves of hate rolled over him. Then the front bell rang and Rhoda answered it.

"I haven't been able to reach you," someone was saying through the door. It was Sheila Williams who lived just down the lane. "Lately lines seem to get tied up more and more. It's about tonight's game."

Just then Rhoda opened the door and Sheila came to an abrupt halt as she saw her old friend's face. Her expression turned stony and she said, "I wanted you to know the game is off." Then she strode away.

Unbelieving, Rhoda watched her go. "After forty years!" she exclaimed. She slowly came back to her husband and stared down at him. "Forty years of 'undying' friendship, gone like that!" Her eyes softened a little. "Maybe I'm wrong, Connor, maybe I said too much through Central myself. And maybe I'd have acted like Sheila if *they* had been the ones."

He withdrew his hands from his face. "I've done the same thing to other wretches myself. We'll just have to get used to it somehow. I've enough social credits to hang on here a year anyway."

"Get used to it," she repeated dully. This time there was no denunciation but she had to flee up the stairs to be alone.

He went to the big bay window and, trying to keep his mind blank, watched Max respading the petunia bed. He really should

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go out and tell the robot to stop, he decided, otherwise the same work would be repeated again and again. But he just watched for the next hour as Max kept returning to the far end of the bed and working his way up to the window, nodding mindlessly with each neat twist of his spade attachment.

Rhoda came back downstairs and said, "It's six-thirty. The first time since the boys left that they didn't call us at six." He thought of Ted on Mars and Phil on Venus and sighed. "By now," she went on, "they know what's happened. Usually colonial children just refuse to have anything more to do with parents like us. And they're right—they have their own futures to consider."

"They'll still write to us," he started reassuring her but she had already gone outside where he could hear her giving Max vocal instructions for preparing dinner. Which was just as well —she would know the truth soon enough. Without a doubt the boys were now also guilty by association and they'd have nothing left to lose by maintaining contact.

At dinner, though, he felt less kindly toward her and snapped a few times. Then it was Rhoda's turn to exercise forebearance and to try to smooth things over. Once she looked out the picture window at the perfect synthetic thatch of the Williams' great cottage, peeping over the hollyhock-topped rise of ground at the end of the garden. "Well?" he demanded. "Well?"

"Nothing, Connor."

"You sighed and I want to know what the devil—."

"Since you insist—I was thinking how lucky Sheila Williams always is. Ten years ago the government authorized twins for her while I haven't had a child in thirty years, and now our disaster forewarns her. She'll never get caught off guard on a paraNormal line."

HE snapped his fingers and Max brought out the pudding in a softly shining silver bowl. Above it hovered a bluish halo of flaming brandy. "Maybe not. I've heard of people even being Suspended without a reason." He slowly savored the first spoonful as if it might be the last ever. From now on every privileged pleasure would have that special value. "One more year of such delights."

"If we can stand the ostracism."

"We can." Suddenly he was all angry determination. "I did the wrong thing today, admitted, but it really was the truth, what I said. I've concentrated right and still got wrong numbers!"

"Me too, but I kept thinking it was my own fault."

"The real truth's that while

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the System assumes more authority each decade it keeps getting less efficient."

"Well, why doesn't the government do something, get everything back in working order?"

His grin showed no pleasure. "Do you know anybody who could help repair a Master Central Computer?"

"Not personally but there must be—."

"Must be nothing! People are slack from having it so good, don't think as much as they used to. Why bother when you can tap Central for any information? *Almost* any information."

"How can it all end?"

"Who knows and who cares?" He was angry all over again. "It will still be working well enough for a few centuries and we, we're just left out in the cold! I'm only ninety, I can live another sixty years, and you, you're going to have a good seventy-five more of this deprivation."

Max was standing at the foot of the table, metal visual lids closed as he waited for instructions. Rhoda considered him unthinkingly, then snapped back to attention. "Nothing more, Max, go to the kitchen and disconnect until you hear from us."

"Yes," he said in that programmed tone which indicated endless gratitude for the privilege of half-being.

"That ends my sad day," Conner sighed. "I'm taking a blackout pill and intend to stay that way for the next fourteen hours."

* * *

THE next morning he rode into the city in the same car as the one that had brought him back the day before. None of the regulars even deigned to look in his direction. There was another change today. Only two fellow Suspendeds were reading their books even though there had been three for the past few months. Which meant another one had exhausted his income and was being forced into the inner city.

At the office none of Conner's associates greeted him. They didn't even have to contrast the new tension in his face with the easy-going, flannelled contentment of their fellows. Undoubtedly somebody had tried to reach him or Rhoda and heard the Suspension Notice on their severed thoughtlines.

As was also to be expected, there was a notice on his desk that his executive services would no longer be needed.

He quickly gathered up his personal things and went downstairs, passing through the office workers pool. Miss Wilson, his Suspended secretary, came up to him. She looked saddened yet, curiously, almost triumphant too. "We all heard the bad news this morning," she said,

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her blue eyes never wavering. "We want you to know how sorry we are since you're not accustomed—."

"I'll never be accustomed to it," he said bitterly.

"No, Mr. Newman, you mustn't think that way. Human beings can get accustomed to whatever's necessary."

"Necessary? Not in my books!"

"Some day you may feel differently. I was born into a Suspended family and we've managed. Being on the outside has its compensations."

"Such as?"

"We-l-l—," she faltered, "I really don't know exactly. But you must have faith it will be so." She pulled out a card from a pocket of her sheath dress. "Maybe you'll want to use this some day."

He glanced at the card which said, *John Newbridge, Doctor at Mind, 96th Level, Harker Building, Appointments by Writing Only.* There was no thought-line coding.

"I have no doubt," he muttered. But she was starting to look hurt so he carefully slid the card into his wallet.

"He's very helpful," she said. "I mean, helpful for people who have adjustment problems."

"You're a good girl," he said huskily. "Maybe we'll meet someday again. I'll have my wife call —write to you so you can visit us before we have to come into the city."

"That," she smiled happily, "would be so wonderful, Mr. Newman. I've never been in a home like that." Then, choking with emotion, she turned and hurried away.

WHEN he reached home and told Rhoda what had happened, his wife was not in the least bit moved. "I'll never let that girl in my house," she said through thin lips. "A classless nothing! I'm going to keep my pride while I can."

There was some sense to her viewpoint but, he felt uncertainly, not enough for him to remain silent. "We have to adjust, darling, can't go on thinking we're what we're not."

"Why can't we?" she exploded. "I couldn't even order food today. Max had to go to the AutoMart and pick it up!"

"What are you trying to say?"

"That *you* made this mess!"

For a while he listened, dully unresponsive, but eventually the vituperation became too bitter and he came back at her with equal vigor. Until, weeping, she rushed upstairs once more.

That was the first of many arguments. Anything could bring them on, instructions for Max that she chose to consider erroneous, a biting statement from

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him that she was deliberately making herself physically unattractive. More and more Rhoda took to going into the city while he killed time making crude, tentative adjustments on Max. What the devil, he occasionally wondered, could she be doing there?

But most of the time he did not bother about it; he had found a consolation of his own. At first it had been impossible to make the slightest changes in Max, even those that permitted the robot to remain conscious and give advice. Again and again his mind strained toward Central until the icy-edged truth cut into his brain—there was no line.

Out of boredom, though, he plugged away, walked past the disdainfully-staring eyes of neighbors to the village library, and withdrew dusty microfiles on robotry. Eventually he had acquired a little skill at contemplating what, essentially, remained a mystery to his easily-tired mind. It was not completely satisfactory but it would be enough to get him a better-than-average menial job when he had finally accepted his new condition.

At long last a letter came from Ted on Mars. It said:

> Guilty by association, that's what I am! When it first happened I was furious with the two of you but resignation has its own consolations and I've given up the ranting. Of course, I've lost my job and my new one will keep me from Earth a longer time but the real loss is not being able to think on Earth Central once a day. As you know, it's a funny civilization here anyway. As yet, there's no local telepathic Central but all Active Communicators are permitted to think in on Earth Central once a day—except for the big shots who can even telepath social engagements to each other by way of Earth! Privileged but a pretty dull crowd anyway.
>
> Oh yes, another exception to the general ration, Suspendeds like me. Funny thing about that, seems to me there are more Suspended from the Earth System all the time. Maybe I'm imagining it.
>
> As lovingly as ever, your son Ted (NO. *More* than ever!)

Rhoda really went to pieces for a while after that letter but, oddly enough, all recriminations soon stopped. She began going into the city every day and after each visit seemed a little calmer for having done so.

FINALLY Connor could no longer remain silent about it. But by now all conversations had to be broached by tactful beating around the bush so he began by saying he had decided to take a lower level job in the metropolis.

Rhoda was not surprised. "I know. A good idea but I think

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you should wait a while longer and do something else first."

That made him suspicious. "Are you developing a new kind of unblockable ESP? How'd you know?"

"No," she laughed. "Some day we will maybe and people will use it better this time. But right now I'm just going by what I see. You've been studying Max and I knew you were bound to get restless." She became thoughtful. "What you really want to know, though, is what I've been doing in the city. Well, at first I did very little. I kept ending up in theatres where we Suspendeds can go. That gave a little relief. But since Ted's letter it's been different. I finally got up the courage to see Dr. Newbridge."

"Newbridge!"

"Connor, he's a great man. You should see him too."

"My mind may have smaller scope outside the System but what's left of it isn't cracking, Rhoda." Working himself into a spasm of righteous rage, he stalked out into the garden and tried to convince himself he was calmly studying the rose bushes' growth. But Sheila and Tony Williams came down the lane that skirted the garden and, as their eyes moved haughtily past him, his rage shifted its focus. He came back into the house and remained in sullen silence.

Rhoda went on as if there had been no interruption. "I still say Dr. Newbridge is a great man. He dropped out of the System of his own free will and that certainly took courage!"

"He willingly gave up his advantages and privileges?"

"Yes. And he's explained why to me. He felt it was destroying every Subscriber's ability to think and that it could not last. Some day we would be without anything to do our thinking and he wanted out."

Conner sat down and stared thoughtfully out the window. Max had just lumbered into the garden and, having unscrewed one hand to replace it with a flexible spade, was starting on the evening schedule for turning over the soil at the base of the plants. He would go methodically down one flower bed, then up the next one, until all had been worked over, then would start all over again unless ordered to stop. "Are we to end up the same way?" Connor shuddered. He slapped his knee. "All right, I'll go with you tomorrow. I've got to see what he's like—a man who'd voluntarily surrender ninety percent of his powers!"

* * *

THE next morning they rode into the city together and went to the Harker Building. It was in an area dense with non-telepaths, each one showing that

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telltale cleft of anxiety in his forehead but briskly going about his business as if anxiety were actually a liveable quality. Newbridge had the same look but there was a nonetheless reassuring ease to the way he greeted them. He was tall and white-haired and his face frequently assumed an abstracted look as if his mind were reaching far away.

"You've come here," he said, "for two reasons. The first is dissatisfaction with your life. More precisely, you're dissatisfied with your attitude toward life but you wouldn't be willing to put it that way, not yet. Secondly, you want to know why anyone would willingly leave the System."

Connor leaned back in his chair. "That'll do for a starter."

"Right. Well, there aren't many anomalies like me but we do exist. Most people outside the System are there because they've been Suspended for supposed infractions, or they've been put out through guilt by association, or because they were born into a family already in that condition. Nothing like that happened to me. From early childhood I was trained by parents and teachers to discipline the projective potential of my mind into the System. Like every other paraNormal, I received my education by tapping Central for contact with information centers and other minds. But I was a fluke." His dark blue eyes twinkled. "Biological units are never so standardized that *all* of them fall under any system that can be devised. I functioned in this System, true, but I could imagine my mind existing outside, could see my functioning *from the outside*. This is terribly rare—most people are limited to the functions which sustain them. They experience nothing else except when circumstances force them to. I, though, could see the System was not all-powerful."

"Not all-powerful!" Connor exploded. "It got rid of me awfully easily."

His wife tried to calm him. "Listen, dear, then decide."

"You're surviving as a pariah, Mr. Newman, aren't you? Your wife tells me you've even started to study robot controls, valuable knowledge for the future and personally satisfying now. Millions of people do survive as outsiders, as do the planetary colonists who only have limited access so far to social telepathy. The System has built into it defenses against Subscribers who lack confidence in it—if it didn't it would collapse. But people *in* the System are not forced to remain there. They can *will* themselves out any time they close their minds to it, as I did. But they don't want to will them-

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selves out of it—you certainly didn't—and their comfortable inertia keeps everything going. I think you have to know a little about its history, a history which never would have interested you if you were still comfortably inside it."

He slowly outlined the way it had developed. First those uncertain steps toward understanding the universally latent powers of telepathy, then growing chaos as each individual spent most of his time fighting off unwanted messages. After a period of desperate discomfort a few great minds, made superhuman by their ability to tap each others' resources, had devised the Central System Switchboard. Only living units, delicately poised between rigid order and sheer chaos, could receive mental messages but this problem had been solved by the molecular biologists with their synthesized, self-replicating axons, vastly elongated and cunningly intertwined by the billions. These responded to every properly-modulated thought wave passing through them and made the same careful sortings as a human cell absorbing matter from the world. Then, to make certain this central mind would never become chaotic, there was programmed into it an automatic rejection of all sceptical challenges.

"That was the highest moment of our race," Newbridge sighed. "We had harnessed infinite complexities to our needs. But the success was too complete. Ever since then humanity has become more and more dependent on what was to be essentially a tool and nothing more. Each generation became lazier and there's no one alive who can keep this Central System in proper working order." He leaned forward to emphasize his point. "You see, it's very slowly breaking down. There's a steady accretion of inefficiency mutations in the axons and that's why more and more switching mistakes are being made—as in your case."

CONNOR was dazed by it all. "What's going to be the upshot, I mean, *how* is it going to break down?"

Newbridge threw up his hands. "I don't know—it's probably a long way off anyway. I guess the most likely thing is that more and more errors will accumulate and plenty of people will be Suspended just because Central is developing irrational quirks. Maybe the critical social mass for change will exist only when more are outside the System than inside. I suspect when that happens we'll be able to return to *direct* telepathic contact. As things are, our projection attempts are always blocked." A

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buzzing sound came out of a small black box on the doctor's desk, startling Connor who in his executive days had received all such signals directly in his head. "Well, I've another patient waiting so this will have to be the end of our chat."

Connor and his wife exchanged glances. He said, "I'd like to come back. I'll probably have a twenty-hour week so I'll be in town a few days a week."

"More than welcome to come again," Newbridge grinned. "Just make the arrangements with Miss Richards, my nurse."

When they were in the street Rhoda asked, "Well, what do you think now?"

"I don't know what to think yet—but I do feel better. Rhoda, would you mind going home alone? I think I'll find a job right away."

"Mind?" she laughed. "It's wonderful news!"

After he left her he wandered around the city a while. In his paraNormal days he had never noticed them but it certainly was true that there were a lot of Suspendeds about. He studied some of them as he went along, trying to fathom their likes and dislikes by the way they moved and their expressions. But, unlike the paraNormals, each was different and it was impossible to see deeply into them.

Then, as he rounded a corner, he was suddenly face to face with his new enemy. A large flat park stood before him and there in the middle was a hundred-story tower of smooth seamless material, the home of the Central System's brain. There were smaller towers at many points in the world but this was the most important, capable of receiving on its mile-long axons, antennas of the very soul itself, every thought projected at it from any point in the solar system. The housing gleamed blindingly in the sun of high noon, as perfect as the day it had been completed. That surface was designed to repel all but the most unusual of the radiation barrages that could bring on subtle changes in the brain within. The breakdown, he thought bitterly, would take too many centuries to consider.

He turned away and headed into an Employment Exchange. The man behind the desk there was a Suspended, too, and showed himself to be sympathetically understanding as soon as he studied the application form. "ParaNormal until a few months ago," he nodded. "Tough change to make, I guess."

Connor managed a little grin. "Maybe I'll be grateful it happened some day."

"A curious thought, to say the least." He glanced down the application again. "Always some kind of work available although

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there do seem to be more Suspendeds all the time. Robot repair—that's good! Always a shortage there."

So Connor went to work in a large building downtown along with several hundred other men whose principal duty was overseeing the repair of robot servitors by other servitors and rectifying any minor errors that persisted. He was pleased to find that, while some of his fellow workmen knew much more about the work than he did, there were as many who knew less. But the most pleasing thing of all was the way they cooperated with one another. They could not reach directly into each other's minds but the very denial of this power gave them a sense of common need.

HE visited Newbridge once a week and that, too, proved increasingly helpful. As time went on, he found he was spending less of it regretting what he had lost. But once in a while a paraNormal came through the workshop, eyes moving past the Suspendeds as if they did not exist and the old resentment would return in all its bitterness. And when he himself did not feel this way he could still sense it in men around him.

"Perfectly natural way to feel," Rhoda said, "not that it serves any purpose."

"It's paraNormal lack of reaction," he tried to explain, "that's what really bothers me. They don't even bother to notice our hatred because we have the strength of insects next to their's. They can all draw on each others' resources and that totals to infinitely more than any of us have, even if as individuals they're so much less. The perfect form of security."

But for a moment one day that security seemed to be collapsing. Above the work floor in Connor's factory there was a gallery of small but luxurious offices in which the executive staff of paraNormals 'worked.' None of them came in more than two days a week but use of these offices was rotated among them so all were ordinarily occupied and workers, going upstairs to the stock depot, could see paraNormals in various stages of relaxation. Usually the paraNormal kept his feet on a desk rest and, eyes closed, contemplated incoming entertainment. On rarer occasions he would be leaning over a document on the desk as his mind received the proper decision from Central.

This particular morning Connor was feeling bitterly envious as he went by the offices. He had already seen seven smugly-similar faces when he came by Room Eight. Suddenly the face of its occupant contorted in agony,

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then the man got up and paced about as if in a trap. Deciding he had seen more than was good for him, Connor hurried on. But the man in Nine was acting out the same curious drama. He quickly retraced his steps, passing one scene of consternation after another, and went back down to the work floor, wondering what it all meant.

Soon everybody knew something extraordinary was afoot as all the paraNormals swarmed noisily onto the runway overlooking the floor. They were shouting wordless sounds at each other, floundering about as they did so. Then, with equal suddenness, everything was calm again and, faces more relaxed, they went back into their offices.

That evening Connor heard the same story everywhere—for ten minutes all paraNormals had gone berserk. On the monorail he noticed that, though still more relaxed than their unwelcome fellows, they no longer exuded that grating *absolute* sense of security. No doubt about it—for a few minutes something had gone wrong, completely wrong, with the Central System. "I don't like it," Rhoda said. "Let's see Dr. Newbridge tomorrow."

"I'll bet it's a good sign."

Newbridge, though, was also worried when they got to see him. "They're losing some of their self-confidence," he said, "and that means they're going to start noticing us. Figure it out, Newman, about one-third the population of Earth—nobody can get exact figures—is outside the System. The paraNormals will want to reduce our numbers if more breakdowns take place. I'll have to go into hiding soon."

"But why you of all people?" Connor protested.

"Because I and a few thousand others like me represent not only an alternative way of life—all Suspendeds do that—but we possess more intensive knowledge for rehabilitating society after Central's collapse. That collapse may come much sooner than we've been expecting. When it does we're going to have enormous hordes of paras milling around, helplessly waiting to learn how to think for themselves again. Well, when we finally reach the telepath stage next time we'll have to manage it better." He took out an envelope. "If anything happens to me, this contains the names of some people you're to contact."

"Why don't you come to our place now?" asked Rhoda. "We'll still be able to hold it for a few more months."

"Can't go yet, too many things to clear up. But maybe later." He rose and extended his hand to them. "Anyway it's a kind—and brave—offer."

"Sounds overly melodramatic

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to me," Connor said when they were outside. "Who'd want to harm a psychiatric worker with no knowledge except what's in his head and his personal library?"

BUT he stopped harping on the point when they reached the monorail station. Three Suspendeds, obviously better educated than most, were being led away by a large group of paraNormals. The paraNormals had their smug expressions back but there was a strange gleam of determination in their eyes. "Sometimes life itself gets overly melodramatic," Rhoda said nervously.

The possible fate of these arrested men haunted him all the way home as did the hostile stares of the people in the monorail car. At home, though, there was the momentary consolation of a pair of letters from the boys. There was little information in them but they did at least convey in every line love for their parents.

But even this consolation did not last long. Why, Connor muttered to himself, did they have to wait for letters when telephone and radio systems could have eased their loneliness so much more effectively? Because the paras did not need such systems and their needs were the only ones that mattered! His fingers itched to achieve something more substantial than the work, now childishly routine, that he was doing at the factory. Just from studying Max he knew he could devise such workable communication systems. But all that was idle daydreaming—it wouldn't be in his lifetime.

The next morning Rhoda insisted they go back into the city to try once more to persuade Newbridge to leave. When they arrived at the Harker Building it seemed strangely quiet. The few people who were about kept avoiding each others' glances and they found themselves alone in the elevator to the 96th level. But Miss Richards, the doctor's nurse-secretary, was standing in the corridor as they got out. She was trembling and found it difficult to talk. "Don't—don't go in," she stuttered. "No help now."

He pushed past her, took one glance at the fire-charred consulting room where a few blackened splinters of bone remained and turned away, leading the two women to the elevator. At first Miss Richards did not want to go but he forced her to come along. "You have to get away from here—can't do any good for him now."

She sucked in air desperately, blinked back her tears and nodded. "There was another ten-minute breakdown this morning. A lot of paraNormals panicked

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and a vigilante pack came here to fire-blast the Doctor. They said I'd be next if things got any worse."

Connor pinched his forehead to hold back his own anguish, then pulled out a sheet of paper. "Dr. Newbridge was afraid of something like this. He gave me a list of names."

"I know, Mr. Newman, I know them by heart."

"Shouldn't we try to contact one of them?"

As they came out into the street, she stopped and thought a moment. "Crane would be the easiest to reach. He's an untitled psychiatrist and one of the alternate leaders for the underground."

"Underground?"

"Oh, they tried to be prepared for every eventual—."

"It's impossible!" Rhoda broke in. She had been looking up and down the great avenue as they talked. "There isn't one person in the street, not one!"

An abandoned robot cab stood at the curb and he threw open the door. "Come on, get in! Something's happening. Miss Richards, set it for this Crane's address."

The cab started to shoot uptown, turning a corner into another deserted boulevard. As it skirted the great Park, he pointed at Central Tower. There seemed to be a slight crack in the smooth surface half way up but, as a moment's mist engulfed the tower, it looked flawless again. Then all the mist was gone and the crack was back, a little larger than before.

CONNOR leaned forward and set the cab for top speed as they rounded into the straightaway of another uptown street. Occasionally they caught glimpses of frightened faces, clumped in lobby entrances, and once two bodies came flying out of a window far ahead. "They're killing our people everywhere," moaned the nurse.

As they approached the crushed forms, Connor slowed down a little. "They're dressed too well—what's left of them. They're paraNormals!"

A minute later they were at the large apartment block where Crane lived. They entered the building through a lobby jammed with more silent people. All were Suspendeds.

At first Crane did not want to let the trio in but when he recognized Newbridge's nurse he unlocked the heavily-bolted door. He was a massively-built man with dark eyes set deeply beneath a jutting brow and the eyes did not blink as Miss Richards told him what had happened. "We'll miss him," he said, then turned abruptly on Connor. "Have you any skills?"

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"Robotics," he answered.

The great head nodded as Connor told of his experience at work and on Max. "Good, we're going to need people like you for rebuilding." He pulled a radio sender and receiver from a cabinet and held an earphone close to his temple, continuing to nod. Then he put it down again. "I know what you're going to say —illegal, won't work and all that. Well, a few of us have been waiting for the chance to build our own communication web and now we can do it."

"I just want to know why you keep mentioning *our* rebuilding. They're more likely to destroy all of us in their present mood."

"*Us?*" He took them to the window and pointed toward the harbor where thousands of black specks were tumbling into the water. "They're destroying themselves! Some jumping from buildings but most pouring toward the sea, a kind of oceanic urge to escape completely from themselves, to bury themselves in something infinitely bigger than their separate hollow beings. Before they were more like contented robots. Now they're more like suicidal lemmings because they can't exist without this common brain to which they've given so little and from which they've taken so much."

Connor squared his shoulders. "We'll have our work cut out for us. Dr. Newbridge saw it all coming, you did too."

"Not quite," Crane sighed. "We assumed that at the time of complete breakdown the System would open up, throwing all the Subscribers out of it, leaving them disconnected from each other and waiting for our help. But it worked out in just the opposite manner!"

"You mean that the System is staying closed as it breaks down? Like a telephone exchange in which all the lines remained connected and every call went to all telephones."

"Exactly," Crane replied.

"I don't understand this technical talk," Rhoda protested, watching in hypnotized horror as the speck swarm swelled ever larger in the sea.

"I'll put it this way," Crane explained. "Their only hope was to have time to develop the desire for release from the System as it died. But they are dying *inside* it. You see, Mrs. Newman, every thought in every paraNormal's head, every notion, every image, no matter how stupidly trivial, is now pouring into every other paraNormal's head. They're over-communicating to the point where there's nothing left to communicate but death itself!"

THE END

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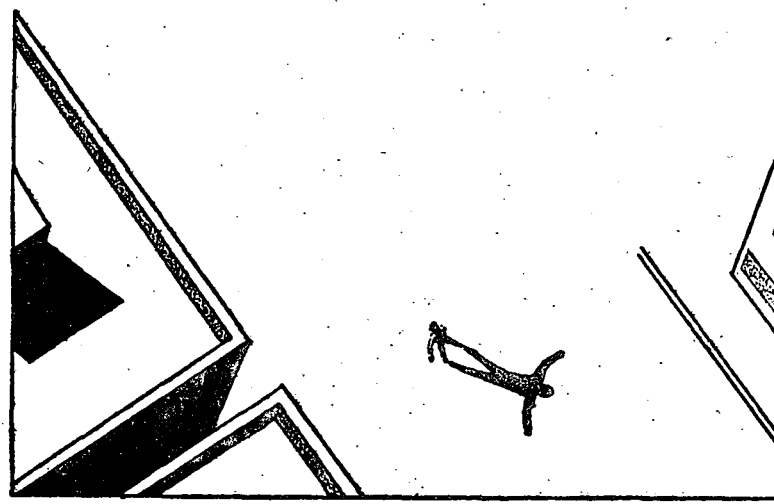
THE GOD ON THE 36th FLOOR

By HERBERT D. KASTLE

Illustrated by FINLAY

Mercy Adrians was 19, and good to look at. Edwin Tzadi was of undetermined age and not good to look at. Derrence Cale was a phoney. But at least, he thought, he was a man.

DERRENCE CALE walked into the glittering tile, marble and metal lobby of the Chester Chemical Company Building at a quarter to nine. Office hours were nine-fifteen to five-fifteen, but Derrence came early and left late every day. He unlocked the doors to the Public Relations department, checked to see that the



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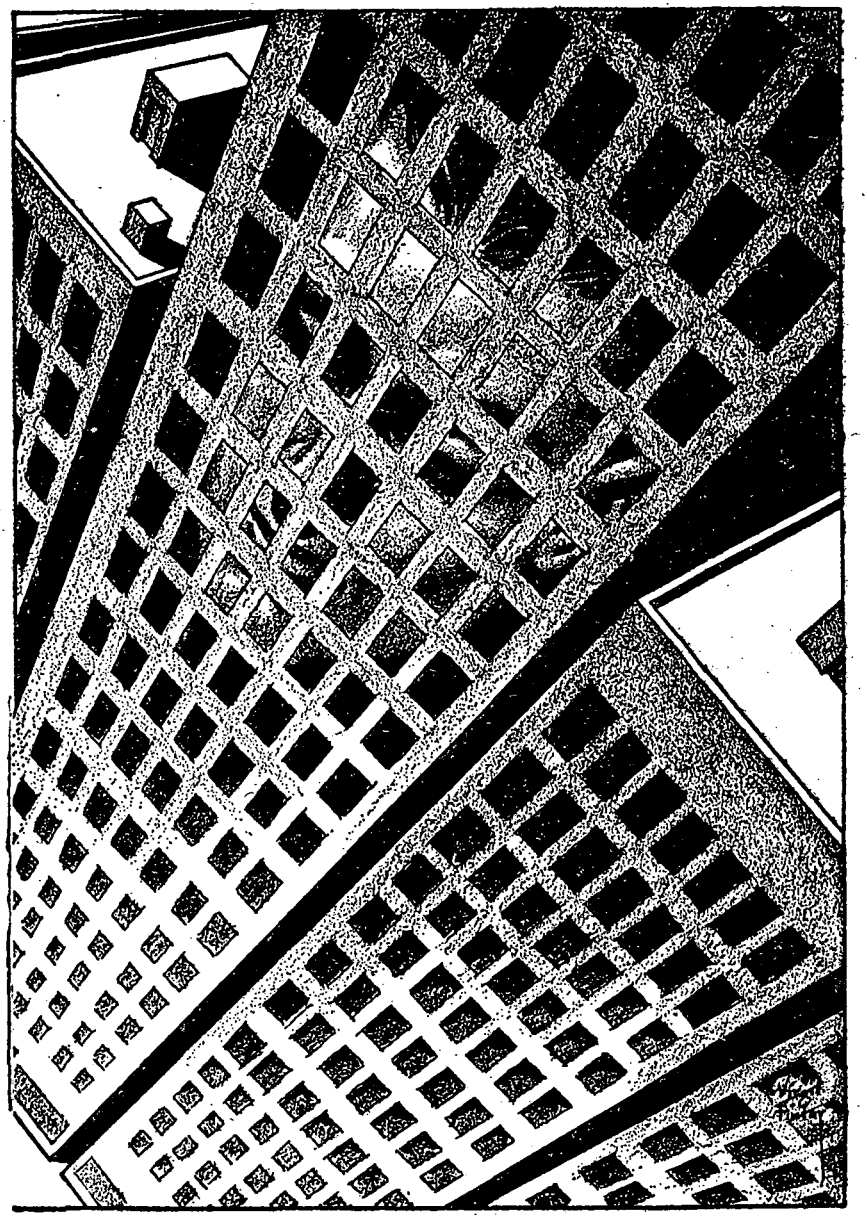

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custodial staff hadn't left any rags or buckets around and, in general, fulfilled the duties of floor manager.

Not that Derrence had been *assigned* these duties. He'd assumed them over the past eight years, and because Chester Chemical was as big as it was, he got away with it. Derrence had effectively hidden himself among the 9,000 Chester employees; lost himself, as so many talentless but shrewd people do, in the hive of offices that make up a giant corporation. That was why he was able to draw a salary, and merely play at working.

He was alone in the self-service elevator when it shot upward. He was alone when he stepped out on the 36th floor. But after unlocking the doors across the hall from the reception room, he was immediately aware that he was *not* alone.

From down the long, pastel-green, fluorescent-lighted corridor on his left had come, and still came, the sound of a voice. A high-pitched male voice, totally unfamiliar to Derrence Cale. There was no answering voice, so the man was using a phone.

It could only be one of the cleaning staff; and they'd been warned by management never to use office equipment.

DERRENCE strode toward the voice, heels clicking sharply on the black squares of asphalt tile. The voice stopped. *Aha, a little game of cat and mouse, was it?* Derrence kept going, watching the seemingly endless line of offices on his right for one with its door open or a light shining through the frosted glass panel. And he saw the light in the office ahead.

He stopped, his long, smooth face crinkling in a swift smile. He took a quick, silent step, and jerked open the door. The man seated behind the desk was middle-aged, fat and solemn. He had bright blue eyes and jet black hair. "Good morning," he said in his high-pitched voice. "I'm Mr. Tzadi." He smiled. "I'd better spell it." He spelled it. "Edwin Tzadi. This is my first day."

So that explained it, and Derrence was ready to back out as gracefully as possible. But then he noticed how meek Tzadi seemed, and decided to stay a few moments. He came forward with hand out-stretched. "Welcome aboard, Ed. I'm Derrence Cale. Der to you." They shook hands. "New writer, eh?"

Tzadi nodded and smiled.

Derrence put his hands behind his back and rocked on his heels. "Personnel never bothered to inform me that you were coming. I'll have to check Miss McCarty. She may have heard and forgotten to mention it."

"Is she your secretary?"

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Derrence said, "Not exactly," and regretted having given into his impulse to act important. "Well, work's awaitin', as they say in the Ozarks." He chuckled. "Though for future reference, Ed, you needn't come in until nine-fifteen. The hours at Chester Chemical . . ."

"Yes, I know, but I am an early riser. I will be here each morning at eight-thirty, perhaps earlier."

Derrence decided he didn't like Tzadi. There was something vaguely foreign in the way the man spoke. Not that he had an accent. It was more a matter of off-beat timing. And that name —Central European in origin. Personnel was getting sloppy.

"I'm afraid that's not feasible, Ed. At eight, the cleaning people leave, locking the hall doors. Miss McCarty and I have keys, but we couldn't allow them out of our possessions. (He'd waited three years before borrowing Miss McCarty's and having a copy made.)

"I too have a key." The fat man beamed. "That solves our little problem, doesn't it?"

"How'd you get . . ." He stopped short. *Time to leave. Should never have come in here in the first place. This man isn't an ordinary writer!*

"Is there anything wrong, Der?"

Derrence smiled. "Wrong? Of course not. Just thought of an urgent bit of business. Again, *welcome* aboard, Ed."

"And again, thank you, Der." Tzadi smiled, somewhat apologetically. "And again, that question."

"What question?"

"Is Miss McCarty your secretary?"

"I answered it," Derrence said, and found it hard to smile. "I said she *wasn't*."

"No, Der," Tzadi said, right hand rising, index finger lifting scholastically. "You said, and I quote, 'Not exactly.' That indicated semi-secretarial status."

DERRENCE was immediately frightened. He fought it by telling himself he was jumping to conclusions. There was no reason in the world to assume that the man was a company spy, especially since Chester Chemical never had been known to employ such methods.

He laughed. It was a rich, hearty, booming, self-confident laugh, developed by means of long practice with a tape recorder. Hearing it, he was able to form an answer. "Actually, Ed, Miss McCarty is the floor manager. She assigns new offices . . . as she did this one to you, right?"

"No. Mr. Chester said to choose any empty office that pleased me."

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Mr. Chester! The Founder himself!

Derrence opened the door and waved his arm and chuckled and nodded and exuded good will, and said, "See you, Ed."

"Der," Mr. Tzadi said, rising. He was extremely short; not more than five feet, if that. "If Miss McCarty is floor manager, what are you?"

"No title, *per se*," Derrence said, and was horrified to hear his shortness of breath, his panicked panting. He fought for control. "I . . . work with her. The arrangement is loose, informal, almost unofficial. A typical Chester Company operation." He had the door open now, and stepped through it sideways. "You'll soon learn what that means, Ed. We all stay loose here. No rigid adherence to rules. No frenzied competition. No sweat. Get it?"

Mr. Tzadi's face looked blank. He shook his head. "I am afraid not, Der. Mr. Chester said that each employee has a position, a function, a title, and performs within sharply defined areas. I am listed as Public Relations Writer in the Personnel books. You too are listed as Public Relations writer, eleven thousand dollars per annum."

A tortured laugh was forced from Derrence Cale. The man had revealed himself as a company spy! Who else had access to the Personnel records? He waved his arm again, said, "Simply must rush," and fled.

HIS office was at the other end of the floor from Tzadi's. He reached it, shut the door and slumped into his chair. He was trembling. This was the first time in almost six years that anyone had shown true knowledge of his position. The last time had been when old Halvertson, his group head, had called him in and said, "Derrence, your work's falling off badly. I'd be justified in recommending you for discharge right now, but I want to give you a fighting chance. We've got the new polio vaccine pamphlet to do, and an important fact sheet for distribution to newspapers. I'll be watching you carefully." But he hadn't. He'd dropped dead two days later while walking to the men's room. When word came that Halvertson's group was being dissolved and his writers assigned to other groups, Derrence had decided to make his move. Besser and Trance had been assigned to Gordon. Pete Ward had come to Derrence's office and said, "While I don't really need an extra man, Cale, you're supposed to be assigned to me." Derrence had expressed delight . . . "but I've got quite a bit of work to clear up before I'm free, Mr. Ward." Ward had

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seemed relieved. "Yes, well, carry on, Cale." Derrence had carried on for three months; then Ward had been promoted upstairs, and the man who took his place never even spoke to Derrence. Derrence carried on and on, creating the impression, which soon hardened into fact, that he was now overseeing Miss McCarty in her position as floor manager. Since he was careful to please and flatter her, and meticulous in maintaining the routine which kept him outwardly busy, he'd never again been asked to report to anyone, work for anyone, account to anyone. As for his salary, it was handled by total strangers—the Fiscal department on the 17th floor, which was as remote from the 36th floor as interior New Guinea. Now this Tzadi came laong, and soon the lovely, secure life would go down the drain. And what would he do then?

His face went gray, and he whispered, "I could go back to writing . . ."

He groaned. It was impossible! He couldn't write. He couldn't even sit for the hours necessary for writing!

A deal. He had to make a deal with Tzadi. Twenty a week for as long as he was allowed to go on this way. Or thirty. Maybe even forty.

"Or kill the dirty little . . ."

His voice, hard and shrill, shocked him. He was standing, fists clenched, body trembling, leaning forward as if about to rush to the door and up the hall.

He made himself sit down. He laughed, but it didn't come out his hearty, impressive laugh. It was a laugh he hadn't heard since college days (except in dreams; nightmares of the past) —weak, frightened, ineffectual and apologetic.

There was a knock at the door. He straightened in his chair, took a deep breath, said, "Come ahead."

The door opened. Mr. Tzadi stood there, his round face solemn. "Before you become too involved in your numerous and important duties, Der, I would like to suggest that we have lunch together."

Derrence blinked. "Yes . . . how about today?"

"Today would be fine, Der. We could talk about the company and our respective positions. You could, perhaps, help me with a rather pressing problem."

Derrence relaxed quite suddenly. "Twelve o'clock. Come by here?"

"Yes, Der." The door closed.

Derrence lit a cigarette. He no longer trembled. In that luncheon invitation he read a deal.

AT NOON, Tzadi appeared in the office doorway. Derrence

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was dictating a memo to Personnel on the company's tacit acceptance of two-hour lunch periods by all but secretarial help. He broke off in mid-sentence and smiled at Mercy. "We'll finish later, dear. You've typed those other memos, haven't you?" Mercy said, "Most of them." She rose and turned to the door, and only then saw Tzadi. She said, "Hi, Ed," and walked by him and out of the office.

Tzadi came inside. "Lovely young lady." It was a remarkably mild comment compared to what most of the writers said when watching Mercy swinging along. She was nineteen, and very good to look at—especially from the rear. Which was further proof, if any were needed, that Tzadi was the company spy type; not likely to be swayed by emotions that moved other men. Yet he wanted *something;* of that Derrence was sure. It could only be money.

"Yes," Derrence said. "I keep her busy. Memos, memos, dozens of memos." Which was the truth, except that once Mercy brought him the memos, neatly typed, he tore them into small pieces and filed them in his waste basket.

"Is she dependable in her work?" Tzadi asked, looking as if he were thinking of other things.

"I thought you knew her. She seemed to know you—calling you by your first name."

Tzadi blinked his eyes. "I met her this morning. You know these young girls—friendly as kittens."

Derrence nodded, but maintained his smile. Mercy only *looked* like Venus. Actually, she was shy and reserved, especially with strangers. For her to say, "Hi, Ed," required a minimum of several weeks acquaintanceship. That meant she had met Tzadi *before* he came to this floor. That meant she was—unwittingly, perhaps—an accomplice of Tzadi's. Which in turn meant that the fat man had all the information he needed to get Derrence fired. But it no longer bothered Derrence. He and Tzadi were going to make a deal. He would bet his life on it.

They walked into the hall. Derrence said, "Well, Ed, it's going to be a long, interesting lunch. Shall we splurge and try Manfredo's? They have a degree of privacy which, I'm sure, we'll both appreciate."

Tzadi nodded. "Whatever you say, Der."

"I say Manfredo's." He chuckled. Might as well make the best of it. So his comfortable life was going to suffer changes. So the brandy wouldn't be the best, and he'd buy his suits on sale, and he'd lunch three or four times a week in the company cafeteria. It might even mean giving up his beloved Sutton Place apart-

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ment. But he'd still be better off than if he had to hunt for a new job . . . and actually work.

THEY started with vodka Gibsons. Derrence gulped his, and was ready for another. Tzadi, however, merely sipped once, and then read the menu. Derrence decided he couldn't relax *too* much. There was going to be some hard bargaining. Tzadi said, "It's very nice here, but rather expensive. I would like to be able to afford Manfredo's, but I doubt . . ."

"What do you earn?" Derrence asked bluntly.

Tzadi looked at him. "Twenty thousand."

Derrence was startled. "Really? That's very high for a PR writer . . . or even a company investigator."

Tzadi smiled. "You know what they say. No matter what you earn, you always need more."

"And you need more?"

"Yes. I have hidden expenses."

"Like what?"

Again Tzadi smiled. "Now, Der, you wouldn't believe me if I told you."

"Try me."

"Mental improvement. It costs me ten thousand a year and up to maintain the rate of growth I desire."

"You mean college courses and books and such things cost you *ten thousand* a year?"

"I said you wouldn't believe me."

"So you did," Derrence muttered.

"Shall we order?"

Derrence decided the time had come. "How much?" he asked quietly.

Tzadi was looking around the room. He turned to Derrence. "I beg your pardon?"

"How much do you want?"

Tzadi stared at him; then his head jerked slightly and he smiled and said, "Ah, yes. How much. For my silence. I see. That *would* be the way, wouldn't it?"

Derrence didn't understand the man's reaction. It was almost as if money had never entered Tzadi's head before this moment. But if it hadn't been money . . .

Tzadi said, "How much would you consider equitable?"

"You make almost twice as much as I do," Derrence said, some bitterness investing his voice. "Twenty a week should be enough to give you a few extra sessions in . . . mental improvement."

"Agreed," Tzadi said.

Derrence covered his surprise, and his discomfort. This wasn't a man adept in the shakedown, the way a company spy should be. This was a man pleasantly surprised by a windfall!

"For that," Derrence said, "I expect absolute silence. You understand me, don't you?"

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"Yes. I do. You can count on me, Der."

"Good," Derrence muttered, fighting the awful feeling that he'd thrown away a hefty slice of income for nothing. Yet Tzadi *had* information which could hurt him. Tzadi *had* known Mercy before today and lied about it. Tzadi *had* said he needed "help" with a personal problem.

THEY ordered. Tzadi ate lightly for a fat man; he left more than half his meal. As soon as he pushed away his plate, he said, "I wonder if you'd be kind enough to help me in another way, Der."

Derrence stopped chewing; then swallowed and took a sip of water. "Another way," he said flatly. So money *hadn't* been Tzadi's object.

"Yes. I . . . uh . . ." For the first time, Tzadi showed uncertainty, even embarrassment. "Just as you're in trouble because of what I know, I'm in trouble because of what someone else knows. And actually, this someone else knows that I know about you."

"You mean you have to pay off . . ."

"No. She won't accept a bribe. Not money, not position, not anything. She wants me to . . . turn you in."

Derrence stared at Tzadi. "Then what can I possibly do?"

Tzadi dropped his eyes. "Do away with her," he whispered.

They sat quietly for a good five minutes, Tzadi looking at the table, Derrence staring at Tzadi. Then Derrence said, "What does she know about you, Tzadi? I mean, what's the *real* reason you want her killed? You'll never make me believe it's just that she knows you know about me. You'd simply turn me in and the problem would be solved!"

Tzadi looked up. "I've told you the truth. I don't want to turn you in. She insists that I do. She's given me until next Monday—that's seven days, counting today. I have an office on the 41st floor. I moved down to 36 to meet you, personally; to decide whether I could turn you in. And I can't."

Derrence laughed.

Tzadi nodded. "I know it sounds ridiculous, but you represent something to me. Something unique and important and . . ." He stopped. He said, "We'll forget the twenty a week, though I desperately need extra money. If you will do away with Mercy Adrians . . ."

"Mercy? My secretary? *She* insists that you turn me in?"

"Yes. Do away with her and you can continue with your job, your life, as if nothing had happened. Let her live . . ." He shrugged.

Again Derrence laughed. "You

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assume my job means enough to me so that I'd *kill* for it?"

"I hope so," Tzadi whispered. "I fervently hope so."

"Well it doesn't," Derrence snapped, and looked around for the waiter.

Tzadi sighed. "Then there's nothing more to be said. I will give you as long as possible—until next Monday. Then I shall inform the proper people."

"Big deal," Derrence said, his heart sinking, his stomach twisting. "Better out of work than in the electric chair."

"Oh, but I can assure you of successfully escaping detection."

"You can," Derrence said, smiling thinly. He caught the waiter's eye. "And how can you do that?"

"I . . . I can't tell you."

"I thought so. Why don't you do the job yourself, if you're so sure of getting away with it?"

"I am incapable of such things—just not built for ending life."

THE waiter came. Derrence asked for the bill. The waiter glanced at the plates half full of food and asked if anything was wrong. Derrence said no, they were merely in a hurry. The waiter said, "But, sir, the management would be willing to give you credit for a meal if, indeed, the food were not absolutely . . ."

Tzadi said, "Will you stop this theatrical nonsense? Don't you know there's no audience left to appreciate it?"

The waiter looked at him. "Truly, sir?"

Tzadi hesitated; then said, "Except for one. Just one. And does it make sense to expect that one to come to this place of all the places in the world?"

The waiter's face was grim. "I . . . I find it a very painful concept, sir. I know it was bound to happen, that it was the logical goal, and still . . ."

"Yes," Tzadi said. "Now please give us the bill."

The waiter wrote quickly and tore the sheet from his pad. He said, "That one, sir . . . is he protected?"

"No," Tzadi said. "The majority say he must go."

"Well, they surely know what is best. But I . . ." He sighed and walked away.

"I too," Tzadi murmured. "I too."

"What was *that* all about?" Derrence asked. He was preoccupied with his own problem, but had heard enough to be puzzled. "You two sounded like a bad mystery movie; members of the underground meeting in enemy territory."

"Something like that," Tzadi said.

"One what?" Derrence asked. "You said there was only one. And what did he have to do with

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a waiter offering us credit on an unfinished meal? And why . . ."

"We are members of a rather strange religious order," Tzadi said, looking at Derrence with unblinking intensity. "The objects of our worship are just about extinct. Except for one. I recognized this waiter as practicing a certain ritual . . . well, suffice it to say I told him we have run out of gods."

"Except for one?"

"Yes. One. Just one. And soon that one . . ."

"One what? Is it an animal?"

"Yes, an animal."

"How could he expect an animal to come to a restaurant?"

"As man is an animal."

"Then it's a man?"

"Yes, a man."

"To hell with this!" Derrence said, getting to his feet. "You're playing with me! I don't know why, but you're . . ."

TZADI was also standing. "Please do not shout, Der." His eyes darted around the room. "No one here is shouting. You will be noted."

"Noted?" Derrence snorted. "Why the hell don't you learn to speak English! You may have me in the palm of your hand, but you don't speak well enough to be a clerk junior grade!"

"You are right. It is one of the reasons I need mental improvement."

Derrence reached for his wallet. Tzadi said, "Allow me, Der, please. I feel I have upset you and caused you to have a bad lunch."

Derrence had to laugh at that. He was confused, and through the confusion a strange new fear was growing, but still he had to laugh. "To put it mildly," he said, and walked away.

He returned to the office without waiting for Tzadi. Mercy was at her desk, typing one of his memos. She glanced up and smiled. "Nice lunch, Mr. Cale?"

He stopped. He looked at her; looked hard. "Yes."

She met his gaze, eyes puzzled.

What in the world could she have on Tzadi to make him want her dead?

"An interesting lunch, too, Mercy. I ate with your old friend, Edwin Tzadi."

She dropped her eyes. "My old friend? I met him today, as you did, Mr. Cale. Did he . . . did he say different?"

"Yes, he said different."

Her head stayed down. "What . . . what did he say?"

"He said you were his enemy, and my enemy." And he knew this was wrong. He was warning her, bringing the moment of his dismissal closer by seven days.

And then he understood *why* he was doing this. He didn't want seven days in which to consider killing Mercy Adrians. He was

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afraid of all that time. He was afraid he would learn that this job meant more to him than a young girl's life. "He said you wanted me turned in. He said that if he didn't turn me in, you would."

Her head came up, slowly, until she was looking at her typewriter. She began to type. He said, "Stop that and answer me."

She continued typing. Mr. Tzadi came up behind them, and passed them. He said, "Hello, Mercy, Der." Neither answered him. He stopped and looked at them. Mercy kept typing. He said, "I see you've made a serious error, Der." He said it softly, sadly.

He continued on up the hall. Derrence watched him. Tzadi said hello to everyone he passed. He called them by name. They called him by name. He knew everyone and everyone knew him.

The confusion was stronger, and so was the strange new fear. Everyone was a spy! Everyone on the 36th floor was in with Tzadi! And yet, Tzadi wanted him to stay on. It was Mercy, and the others, who wanted him fired. Yet how could everyone else . . .

He trembled. He backed from Mercy, staring at her. She kept typing. He turned and entered his office. He closed the door, and wished he could lock it. He heard himself saying, "Dear God, dear God, dear God." He sat behind his desk. Then he got up and went to the window. He looked down to the busy street far below. Cars and people; millions of them. Life, going on normally, as it always had. Why then this feeling of being alone? Why then this growing horror of total isolation?

"Except for one," Tzadi had said to the waiter, and the waiter's face had grown sad and he had moved away. As sad as Tzadi's face when he'd looked at Derrence in the hall a few minutes ago.

And the one was an animal. And man was an animal. And he was a man.

HE shook his head and put his trembling hands together and said, "What is this? You're going to lose your job, granted. Is that any reason to lose your mind too? Tzadi and that waiter are religious nuts. They have a symbolism and language all their own. Besides . . ." Here he laughed, because the fear was coming out into the open, and as soon as it did it was revealed as ridiculous. "Besides, how can you be the last man on earth if Tzadi and all the others are here, right here in Chester Chemical? And the waiter and all the millions down there in the streets? And the other millions in the

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other cities and countries of the world?"

He sat down. He used his handkerchief to wipe sweat from his face and neck. He laughed, and it was almost his booming, confident laugh. He lit a cigarette and inhaled deeply. And then he began to tremble again. Against all logic, all reasoning, the horror of being totally alone in the world returned.

He got up and went to the door. He put his hand on the knob.

No, he couldn't open it!

He laughed. It was a cracked and shattered sound. He said, "Listen. Out there are the typists and writers and executives. Just listen to them. Just listen to the noise . . ." His voice slid upward in a strangled scream. He heard no noise.

He looked at his watch. Two-twenty. there had to be noise!

He put his ear to the door. Nothing. Not a sound of any sort.

He backed from the door, both hands over his mouth. He bumped into his desk. His phone rang. He listened to it. It rang and rang, the only sound on the 36th floor. Finally; he turned and picked it up. He heard Tzadi's voice. "Der, could you come to my office for a moment?"

He said, "What's happening?" He heard himself sobbing, and didn't care. He said, "Am I losing my mind? What's happening?"

"No, Der, you are not losing your mind." Tzadi's voice sounded as if he, too, were weeping. "It's just . . . what I tried to tell you before."

"Yes, before. Listen, I've changed my mind. If it's the only way . . . Listen, Ed, I'll do . . . I'll do what you said. You know, Mercy I'll . . ."

"Too late," Tzadi murmured. "Please come to my office, Der."

"No!"

"You must be dismissed, Der."

"Dismissed," Derrence said. "I must be dismissed." He quieted. "That's all that's going to happen, isn't it? I mean, I'm going to be fired?"

"Then you'll come to my office, Der?"

Derrence took a deep breath. "Yes."

The line clicked and went dead. Derrence put the phone down, carefully. He rubbed at his eyes, then wiped them with a handkerchief. "I'm going to be dismissed." It was a promise, a hope, now that the horror of something else, something insane and impossible, something infinitely worse filled his brain and chest and stomach. "I'm going to be dismissed."

He went to the door. He didn't stop to listen; just opened it. He stepped outside.

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Mercy was at her desk, sitting quietly. She looked at him.

"It's all right, Mercy. I know. You were doing a job. It's all right."

His voice rang in the silence of the 36th floor. Mercy didn't answer. Mercy just looked at him.

He turned from her and walked up the hall. He passed Miss McCarty's office. He stopped, moved back, stood in her doorway. He would apologize for deceiving her.

She sat at her desk, looking at him. He said, "In a short while you'll learn I abused . . ."

His voice was a squeak in an empty cavern, a footfall on a dead planet. And Miss McCarty just looked at him, unblinking, unmoving.

He hurried up the hall, passing secretaries, writers, executives. All sat at their desks quietly; unblinking, unmoving. All looked at him.

He put his head down. He ran, and held back the screams rising in his throat. Tzadi would explain everything. Tzadi would laugh at his insane fears. Tzadi would fire him, and then he would ride down in the elevator and go home and have a drink.

HE REACHED Tzadi's office. The door was open and Tzadi sat behind his desk, unblinking, unmoving. Behind him stood three men; taller, better built men than Tzadi. The middle one was looking out the window, his back to Derrence. The man to the right of Tzadi said, "Come in, please." He had a long, lean face. It looked sad.

Derrence moved forward, slowly, until he was right up against the desk. He looked down at Tzadi. "What's it all about, Ed?"

Tzadi said nothing.

"What did you try to do for me?"

The man to the right of Tzadi said, "He tried to save your life. He'll be dismantled for that. It's a sad thing, of course, him being one of the original hundred, but most have been dismantled anyway."

"Dismantled," Derrence said, the fear was immense now.

"You mean you don't know? You didn't guess anything, and Tzadi didn't tell you?"

Derrence raised his eyes from Tzadi. "Dismantled?"

"Yes. Taken apart. Destroyed. Killed. He lasted longer than most of the original hundred by each year. You understand? He was one of the *first hundred* made by the Original himself. That's why he had defects—stilted speech, squat construction and, most serious, a tendency to romanticize humanity. Even among the latest models, there are a few who feel that way, but once the last human is gone that problem . . ."

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Derrence was calm now; the calmness beyond shock, beyond horror. "*I'm* the last human?"

"So we believe. There might be another in India—we're still checking. One more in Sweden is a possibility. But for the records, Derrence Cale was the last human being."

"Was the last human being," Derrence whispered.

The man to the left of Tzadi began to raise his right arm. The man to the right of Tzadi said, "Not yet." Then, more sharply, to Derrence, "We were kinder in our war than you and your people ever were. We created no blood baths, no gas chambers, no panic. Over a period of twenty-seven years, we eliminated and replaced. Families lived with our replacements, never suspecting the loved one was an android. We caused almost no pain at all, as you'll soon find out."

"Android," Derrence whispered. "Machine."

The voice grew curt. "Anything else you'd like to know?"

Derrence wanted to ask why Tzadi and the others were so quiet now, and why children still ran around the streets of residential neighborhoods, and—above all—what was the sense in a world of machines. But he asked no questions. These were not people. In man's image, but not man. Their answers weren't for him.

"I don't believe you," he said, wanting to hurt them, anger them; wanting most of all to hear himself say it. "I believe it's all a joke, or nightmare, or figment of my insane mind."

The man to Tzadi's right held up his hand. A small opening appeared in the palm, and grew larger. When it was a hole as large as the wrist behind it, the man said, "Breathe deeply and you won't suffer."

"Wait," the man to Tzadi's right said. "He's the last. Let him *believe!*" He tapped the man between; the one looking out the window with his back to Derrence. That man turned, and cleared his throat, and seemed embarrassed. Derrence heard himself laughing. It was too much. He looked at the man and laughed and laughed.

His duplicate, his android self, also laughed. It was the laugh of the true Derrence Cale—weak, frightened, ineffectual and apologetic. "I'm sorry, sir," the android Derrance Cale said. "I hope I can do as well as you've done."

The hand with the hole came across the desk, and something very sweet filled the air. Derrence Cale breathed deeply.

THE END

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She was the Galaxy's most beautiful whore. He knew that if he went to her couch during the time-storm, he, too, would be booking

PASSAGE TO GOMORRAH

By ROBERT F. YOUNG

ILLUSTRATOR SUMMERS

EVEN for a lady of the stars, the Lady Berenice was beautiful. Her short blonde hair made Cross think of Martian maize, and her blue eyes, set wide apart in her tanned, oval face, reminded him of the ice lakes of Frigidia. Her tall, Junoesque body put to shame the pornographic photographs he had seen of it, cheapened the lurid passages he had read about it; betrayed, as yet, no evidence of her apostasy.

He wondered who her lover was, and why she had refused to reveal him.

When the Jacob's lift matched levels with the *Pandora's* lock, she stepped lightly into the ship beside him. The corporation officer who had accompanied her, handed him her papers, then signalled to the longstarmen below. After a moment the lift and its sole occupant sank from sight.

"How soon do we blast?" the Lady Berenice asked.

She was looking at Cross intently, as though trying to probe beyond the bleak grayness of his eyes. "In about fifteen minutes, my lady," he said.

She nodded, stepped into the ship proper. He sealed the lock and escorted her up the spiral companionway to her cabin.

She paused in the doorway. "I'd like my luggage, please."

"I'll bring it up as soon as we're in *A Priori*, my lady. Right now, I'll have to insist that you strap yourself on the acceleration couch."

He watched as she did his

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bidding. "You can get up as soon as the 'all clear' signal sounds," he said presently.

She nodded again, not in the least perturbed. He wondered if she'd be equally calm if "acceleration couch" was something more than a hand-me-down term from pre-degravitation days; if she'd be equally composed if she had to contend with 3 or 4 g's, instead of just the temporary instability of blast-off.

She probably would be, he decided. A miscarriage would not affect her banishment to Gomorrah, but it would save her the unpleasantness of having to give birth to a mutant.

He excused himself and headed for the control room.

A Priori drive, once activated, required no supervision except in cases of emergency. The *Pandora* was only a one-passenger-one-pilot job, but Falcon Lines, Inc., had a reputation throughout the civilized sector of the galaxy for fast, efficient service, and even its smallest ships boasted the latest in automatic equipment.

Cross secured the control-room door behind him, made his way leisurely down the spiral companionway to the hold, where the WineWomenandSong longstarmen had deposited the Lady Berenice's luggage. Even in the artificial ½ g, the two bags were heavy, and he was breathing a little hard when he halted before her door.

He knocked. "Yes?" she answered, her voice muffled by the sound of running water.

"Your luggage, my lady."

The sound of running water ceased, and presently she opened the door. She had wrapped a ship's towel deftly around her torso. It was a white towel that enhanced the hue of her clear, tanned skin. Water glistened on her golden shoulders, ran in twinkling rivulets down her coppery thighs and calves. "Set them inside, please."

Cross complied. She did not move an inch, and his arm, despite his efforts to avoid touching her, brushed her thigh. He withdrew quickly. His arm tingled and his hands were trembling. He kept his eyes averted because he knew what she would read in them. "If you wish anything further, I'll be in my cabin," he said. He turned to go.

"Wait," she said.

"Yes?"

"How—how long will we be in *A Priori?*"

"A little over four hours, ship's time."

"Is—is there any likelihood of a time storm?"

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The question surprised him. Passengers, especially passengers of the Lady Berenice's status, did not usually concern themselves with the exigencies of space travel. They took it for granted, unless otherwise apprised, that such exigencies did not exist. "There is always a chance of a time storm," he said. "But don't worry, my lady. If the conditions for one are present, we will be contacted by the port authority in time to avoid it."

"But suppose something should go wrong. Suppose we weren't informed in time and did get involved in one. What would happen then?"

He could not keep his eyes averted forever, and he forced himself to meet her gaze. He was mildly shocked to see that a quantity of her composure had left her, that there was a certain diffidence in the expression on her face.

Presently: "As you may know, my lady," he said, "*A Priori* is merely the result of the separation of pure space and pure time from the thing-in-itself, or from basic reality. Once separated, pure space can be contracted to the extent where a parsec equals .59 kilometers. Usually pure time contracts accordingly, but sometimes there is a slight discrepancy, and certain phases of *A Priori* contain more time than space. If we should become involved in one of these phases—or storms, if you like—we would lose our awareness of our objective reality and proceed to relive a subjective and sporadic playback of our pasts. So all that could happen to us, actually, are the things that have already happened to us—with the difference that we would relive not only our own experiences, but one another's as well; in pure time, individuality does not exist."

"But wouldn't our objective reality be affected?"

He nodded. "It *could* be," he said, "since, in the absence of any real passage of time, it would be in temporal ratio to our involvement in our pasts, which might force it into a different time plane altogether."

She dropped her eyes. "Then—then in spite of what you said before, something could happen after all—something that hasn't happened before."

"I suppose so, my lady . . . Will that be all?"

"Yes—for now."

"I'll be in my cabin . . ."

"Cabin" was a euphemism for "cubicle." The cramped compartment adjoining the

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control room contained a couch, a desk, a small microfilm library and a well-stocked liquor cabinet, but that was about all. Cross opened the cabinet and poured himself a generous brandy. He drank it fast, then he lay down on the couch and tried to sleep. He always slept out the *A Priori* phases of his runs if they were under eight hours, but he had a good idea that he was going to have a hard time sleeping this one out. He was right. The minute he closed his eyes he saw a white towel and a golden sunrise of shoulders; two breath-taking colonnades of tanned, glistening flesh— There was no sleeping after that.

He swore aloud. Surely she must realize that an ordinary pilot like himself couldn't afford her. Then why had she deliberately exhibited her de luxe charms? Why had she deliberately delayed him at her door with so obviously false an excuse as a discussion of the unstable phase of *A Priori?* He was certainly not naive enough to think that, just because she was a *fallen* lady of the stars, she would waive her fee. If fourteen years in space had taught him nothing else, it had taught him that any extraterrestrial act of love was a business transaction and nothing more.

Still—

He turned angrily on his side, tried to shut her from his mind. She can go to hell, he thought—

But she didn't. She went to New America, instead. He accosted her on a sunny avenue in Little Chicago and they turned, hand in hand, down a narrow street lined with transplanted maples. The season was spring, and the warm air had activated the thermostatically controlled Hi-Fi's hidden in the foliage, and the air was filled with the singing of robins. After a while they came to a shaded walk that wound up to a secluded cottage, and they walked through scented coolness to the door. He noticed, then, that all the while they'd been walking, she'd been wearing nothing but a towel; and it must have been raining, too, despite the sunshine, for her shoulders were glistening with raindrops, and raindrops twinkled on her long, tanned legs—

He was sitting up on the couch. He was sweating. "I'll be damned!" he said. There was a persistent bell-like sound in his ears, and presently he recognized it as the beeping of the communicator. He got up, then, and

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went into the control room and picked up the neatly typed message which the receiver had emitted:

From: Port Authority, Wine-Womenand Song, Thais
To: Nathaniel Cross, Pandora
A Priori disturbance reported bulding up in path of your reality-flow. Emerge into normal space at once and await further instructions. Acknowledge.

Cross stared at the words. Was the Lady Berenice clairvoyant? Had she *known* there was going to be a storm?

He hurried toward the control panel. Suddenly he thought of the towel again, the towel and the deliberate shower. He tried to tell himself that there was nothing unethical in a lady of the stars trying to work off her passage, but it didn't do any good, and his anger kept intensifying till it superseded his common sense, till it transformed him from a seasoned pilot into a frustrated schoolboy. The control panel simply hadn't been designed to be operated by a frustrated schoolboy, and when his fingers sought to punch out the pattern that would snap the *Pandora* back into normal space, they punched, instead, a set of symbols sufficiently unintelligible to activate the alarm.

The alarm performed a two-fold function: it alerted authorized persons and, at the same time, it temporarily incapacitated the particular unauthorized person who had triggered it. Cross staggered back against the bulkhead, his fingers tingling from the automatic shock, his body going numb. He slid slowly to the deck, still conscious but unable to move his limbs.

The first wave of the storm struck, and the ship began to shimmer. Lying there, watching the room dissolve around him, he experienced a strange interval of detachment, and he wondered curiously how much he really knew about himself: whether the outrageous mistake he had just made had been the result of his anger, or whether his anger had merely been a trumped-up excuse for making the mistake; whether the entire action had not resulted from a masochistic desire to participate in the Lady Berenice's past. . . .

The tree was much taller than he had thought, and he wished now that he hadn't been in such a hurry to join the club. He had swum the

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river all right, and he had gone through Devil's Cave without flinching. But you could conquer your fear of water. You could conquer your fear of darkness—

Height was something different.

He shinnied a little higher on the trunk, gazed yearningly up to the last fork, where the highest limb began its graceful journey into the summer sky. He heard the taunts of the other boys from the meadow below. They did not think he could make it. In a way, they didn't want him to make it. If he made it, they wouldn't have anyone to pick on till another new boy moved to town.

Well, he'd show them!

He shinnied furiously for several seconds, then paused again. He was tired, and his chest hurt. His shins smarted from repeated scraping against the trunk.

He looked up at the fork again. It was quite close now, perhaps close enough. He reached up with one arm, managed to wrap it around the larger of the two limbs. After a moment he reinforced his hold with his other arm. He started to pull his body upward, shinnying with his legs. For a while he thought he was going to make it, then his left arm cramped and his right, unable to support his weight, began to slip.

He screamed as he started to fall, but in his desperation he managed to transfer his good arm back to the trunk and keep his legs in position, so that he didn't really fall, he slid, instead, down the trunk to the limb he had left a short time before. He glimpsed the ground, far below, and the height caught up to him once and for all, and he locked his body around the limb and clung there, whimpering.

Presently, he saw one of the other boys start climbing the tree to bring him down, and he heard his new nickname being bandied about on the meadow—

"Eberhardt, Eberhardt, Eberhardt Cross!"

"Gee, Dad, are you going on *another* trip?"

"Sure thing," her father said, looking up from his open suitcase.

"But—but you just got back."

His face looked funny, the way it always did after he and mother had been mouth-fighting—as though he wanted it to look one way and his muscles wanted it to look a totally different way, and he had had to settle for an expression

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halfway in-between. "Sorry, Berenice, have to go again."

"But—"

"Now, don't cry, darling. Please don't cry."

But she cried anyway, she had to. What else could you do when you'd planned all spring for the halcyon summer days and the treks through the woods, the fishing and the campsite, the little fire burning brightly and your father sitting beside you in the serene summer night?

He was on his knees and he was holding her close, and now his face made her think of one of those balloons with faces painted on them that you blew up and twisted into different shapes, only not quite the same, because balloons couldn't cry—

"I'll write you, darling. Be a good girl now, and mind your mother."

The other boys were standing on the corner, waiting for him to pass. He gripped his galactic geography book tightly and he held his mouth firm, and he made his legs behave as though he wanted them to keep right on walking, as though the thought of flight was remote from his thoughts.

"Here comes Eberhardt Cross!"

"Hi, Eberhardt!"

"Climb any trees lately, Eberhardt?"

"Eberhardt, Eberhardt, Eberhardt Cross!"

He kept right on walking. If he stopped it would be worse. They wouldn't settle for mere words then—and there were five of them, and he was only one, and not much of a one at that.

But he thought: I'll show them. I'll show them if it takes me the rest of my life!

"Come in," her mother said, and the tall, handsome man stepped out of the summer night and into the scented living room. "I'm so glad you could drop by . . . Run out and play now, Berenice, like a good little girl. You've been cooped up in the house all day. . . ."

Miss Tenthyear's android eyes beamed brightly as she assumed her lecture-posture by the desk. "Our final subject for today, class," she said, "will be the story of Captain Alexander Eberhardt.

"Your mothers and fathers have probably mentioned his name many times, and they've probably told you about how he piloted the first spaceship to the moon, had a nervous breakdown after he crashed there, and babbled for days

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over the world-wide radio hook-up, begging for someone, anyone, to save him. All of this is true, and Captain Eberhardt, in the eyes of the public, has never been considered a credit to his countrymen. But the bravest of men can collapse when sufficient pressure is applied, and Captain Eberhardt actually died a hero's death. We are all of us merely human, and we should keep this in mind when we pass judgment on our fellow men—"

He was conscious of the other kids looking at him out of the corners of their eyes, and he kept his own eyes focused on his desktop. *Eberhardt, Eberhart, Eberhardt Cross!* he could hear them calling him after the bell had sounded, after Miss Tenthyear had retired to her case behind the desk and had turned herself off. And he could hear his own voice now, his own voice deep inside him, silently shouting the old refrain, but with something added this time: "I'll show them! Space is a tree, in a way. Space is a tremendous tree reaching up into infinity, and I'll climb as high into it as I can get and I'll laugh back down at them in their silly suburban houses and I'll gather a handful of stars and throw them down to Earth like shining acorns. . . .

Her tears had smeared the purple ink, making the passages of the letter illegible. But she had read them once, and once was enough to tell her that her father was never coming back, that his promises were the same old lies, his cheerful phrases the same old clichés, she had read a dozen —a hundred—times before.

How strange that she should remember him so well after eight interminable years, that she should still want him to come back. She had been a gawky girl of 10 when he had gone away for the last time; now she was a worldly young woman of 18—old enough, surely, to be above such childish needs as parental attachments—

She heard the doorbell ring downstairs, and the sound of male voices on the doorstep, and she knew her mother was in business again. She got up from her vanity and went over to the window and looked out at the summer night. There was an apple tree growing beside the house and the apple tree was in blossom. She turned off the electronic screen, reached out and broke off a nearby bough. She held it to her nostrils, rejoicing in

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the sweetness and the purity of the blossoms.

She raised her eyes and saw the summer stars pulsing in the black immensity of the sky. She picked out the patterns of the constellations—the long straggling line of Scorpius, the riotous burgeoning of Sagittarius, the tetrahedron of Libra, the filmy blur of Coma Berenices . . . Subtly, what she breathed and what she saw, what she needed and what she had been denied, blended into a single impression, and she thought: A lady of the stars—that's what I'll be. A lady of the stars . . . And she saw herself, brightly-gowned and glamorous, stepping from star to star, the legions of her lovers following worshipfully behind her. She paused on a global cluster and glanced disdainfully down to the blue-green mote of Earth, and she thought contemptuously of her prosaic mother carrying on her petty assignations in her petty parlor, of her father absconding again and again from reality; then she laughed, and leaped lightly to the Greater Magellanic Cloud, where the Emperor of the Universe humbly awaited her. . . .

"But don't you see?" his father said. "Space is for misfits. A normal man simply doesn't give up his rights as an Earth citizen, his right to marry and have children, just for the privilege of traveling to far-off places."

Cross shifted uncomfortably on the front steps. It was a clear night in August, and the stars were so bright and close that they seemed to brush the topmost branches of the maples lining the suburban street.

"Think about it, Nate," his father went on, puffing self-righteously on his suburban pipe. "You're still young. You're only 19. Why don't you wait for a while—a year, anyway. Maybe you'll change your mind by then."

Cross shook his head. "No," he said. "You don't understand. It's something I have to do . . . Something . . . I . . . have . . . to . . . do. . . ."

Cross massaged his limbs, got slowly to his feet. The control room had regained solidity, but he was not fooled. The *Pandora* had merely reached the relatively stable center of the storm—the eye—and any attempt to throw her back into normal space now would tear her apart, along with everything and everyone on board, and the resultant particles, both inanimate and animate, would be scattered ir-

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retrievably throughout the space-time continuum.

Suddenly he remembered his passenger, remembered her apprehension about time storms. He hurried toward her cabin, telling himself that it was his responsibility to be with her during the danger period, that it was his duty to protect her; and all the while he told himself, he knew that he was lying in his teeth, that there was no danger—only the embarrassment of having to share one's most intimate experiences with another—and that his presence was totally uncalled for.

She opened the door at his knock. One look into her eyes told him that she had been expecting him; one glance at her magnificent body, bereft, now, even of a towel, told him that he had to have her, no matter what the cost.

She drew him into the room and closed the door, and suddenly he knew that this was no ordinary business transaction, that she wanted him as desperately, almost, as he wanted her. He tried to understand, and a glimmering of the truth touched him; then he felt the warmth of her flesh, and then the moistness of her mouth on his, and he seemed to melt, to dissolve, even as the room dissolved around him — the room and the ship and the present. . . .

"Before approving your application, I'm required to brief you," the male interviewer for Camellias, Inc., said. "We don't want any of our future ladies of the stars to look back some day and accuse us of coercing her into Camellia-activity . . . Do you know anything about the profession at all?"

"A little," Berenice said, nervously.

"A very little, I suspect . . . First of all, you must erase from your mind whatever detrimental associations you may have with your future calling. The ancient attitude towards prostitution still prevails on Earth, and probably will continue to prevail for centuries to come; but in space, even a common house-worker is a respected individual, while a full-fledged lady of the stars is the equivalent of a princess or a president's daughter. The 'World's Oldest Profession' has become the 'Galaxy's Noblest Profession'.

"Cosmic radiation, undistilled by the Earth's atmosphere is quite a different proposition from the distilled radiation which has bombarded mankind since birth. Pro-

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longed exposure to it causes certain genic changes in both male and female chromosomes. Interplanetary travel, thanks to *A Priori,* occasioned only relatively brief periods of exposure; but interstellar travel is something else. Even with *A Priori,* the journeys between the stars sometimes require weeks, even months. As a result, no woman can ever enter interstellar space without first forfeiting her function as a woman—unless she wants to give birth to a mutant, or, to call a spade a spade, a monster.

"You are probably familiar with the Earth Council's famous Dual Decision of two generations ago: the decision to confine all interstellar personnel, during their sojourn on Earth, to the port areas; and the decision to set aside Polaris 2 as a haven for the monsters that had already been born and for those that might yet be born. But, however commendable it might have been in other respects, the Dual Decision evaded the most vital aspect of the problem—the need of men in space for the women they could no longer have.

"There was only one solution, and it was obvious from the first. But it was a solution which a sex-conscious, sex-ridden, sex-frightened, sex-bewildered people, whose various religous credos classified sex, per se, as a sin, could not accept—except by degrees.

"The first free lance ladies of the stars were of French, Swedish and Japanese descent. They were followed by most of the other racial strains. Eventually their numbers increased to a point where the Earth Council could no longer ignore their activities and was forced either to combat the star-wide spread of the profession, or to legalize it and to encourage its function along with the time-honored lines of private enterprise. Legalization was inevitable, but still, had it not been for the lobbyists, it might have been irreparably delayed. I am proud to say that the founder of Camellias, Inc., was one of the most articulate and influential of those lobbyists, and it was probably due more to his efforts than to the efforts of the others, that the Prostitution Act of 2340 finally became a reality.

"The creation and maintenance of an interstellar red light system was a complex undertaking, but we need not go into it here. You'll be ade-

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quately schooled in our history at our Martian convent —provided, of course, that you decide to join us. There are, however, two important details which I must call to your attention.

"The first is our caste system. The convents, which the various corporations have set up on Mars, have a common standard, based upon aptitude, personality and technique-achievement, that each prospective lady of the stars must attain in order to graduate. The degree to which she excels in these qualities, together with her physical qualifications, determines her classification, which in turn determines the rates she is allowed to charge for her future services.

"The second is pregnancy. Upon leaving Earth, you will be given a Farbes and Donniger contraceptor-field, guaranteed for life by its manufacturers. *Keep it with you at all times.* There is no excuse for any lady of the stars to suffer the ignominy of giving birth to a monster. The Earth Council has granted us, and the other corporations, the right to banish all our pregnant personnel, together with their lovers, to Polaris 2, and also has permitted us to give the planet the much more appropiate name of 'Gomorrah'.

"As soon as you leave Earth, you will be required to take bi-monthly physicals. Don't try to avoid them; I assure you that you'll be apprehended immediately. However, you'll have nothing to worry about—provided you *keep your field with you at all times.* Do you have any questions?"

Berenice shook her head. "No. No questions."

"Then I assume that you still wish to become a lady of the stars."

She wanted to run away, and then she remembered that she *was* running away. She nodded. Numbly. Miserably. "Yes," she said.

The interviewer beamed. "Splendid!" he said. "Your rating on the aptitude test was very high, and Camellias, Inc., will be delighted to welcome you into its fold. . . ."

"So you want to be a spaceman," the captain of the *Perseus* said. "What makes you think that stowing away on board my ship is going to help you?"

"Well," Cross said, "you can't very well take me back to Earth, so you'll have to do something with me, and I understand that most ships are short-handed."

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"Maybe I can't take you back to Earth personally, but I can throw you in the brig till we reach our first port and *send* you back to Earth. And you wouldn't be able to get out of the quarantine area as easily as you got in, I can assure you of that. You'd be stuck there for the rest of your life as a longstarman."

"Not if I stowed away on another ship," Cross said.

The captain glowered at him for a moment, then: "Why in hell didn't you apply for a berth legally?"

"I couldn't raise the bond," Cross said.

"You mean you were too impatient to go to work long enough so that you could raise it, don't you?"

"That's about the size of it . . . I understand that ship masters have ways and means of getting around such matters."

A dark cloud settled on the captain's face and for a while it looked as though a storm were going to break. Presently, however, the sun broke through and the cloud faded away. "It so happens that I *am* short-handed," he said. "In the galley."

Cross brightened. "That's all right," he said. "I've got to start somewhere."

"Report to Obronski on the after deck . . . Ever operate a refuse disposal unit?"

"No, sir."

"You'll learn. . . ."

"For God's sake," the drunken space marine said. "You act like you never saw a real he-man before. You afraid of me, or something? Come on, smile!"

Her shoulders had touched the wall of the convent's recreation room, and she knew she could delay no longer. She forced herself to relax, forced a warm smile to her lips. "No," she said softly. "I'm not afraid."

The space marine's eyes grew more glazed than ever. "Thash good," he said. "Thash what I wanted to hear." He stepped closer to her, his arms outstretched, his face grotesque with lust.

She waited till he had nearly touched her, then she moved in without warning, brought her knee up sharply and, when he doubled forward, chopped him viciously on the back of the neck with the edge of her palm. He dropped, writhing, to the floor, and she proceeded to kick him deftly with her pointed shoes. She did not stop till he lay still, till the tips of her shoes were crimson, and then she stood, sick and trem-

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bling, in the harsh fluorescent light.

"Excellent!" the female instructor said, entering the room. "A splendid performance, Berenice. It may seem cruel, at first, to employ real victims in our exercises, but there's no other way to learn how to defend yourself effectively—and beasts like this marine here are just the sort of creatures that forget, in their drunkenness, the inflexible rules of our profession, and the sanctity of a lady of the stars. We did not invite him here, you remember. We merely left the force-fence deactivated long enough for him to enter of his own accord, the door ajar, the light burning, so he could see it."

Berenice shuddered. She saw the ecstatic expression on the instructor's ancient, raddled face and she remembered that she herself would be an instructor some day—or a house-mother or a liaison lady—when her beauty had dimmed and her flesh had lost its firmness and not even the lowliest longstarman would want her. She shuddered again. "Isn't—isn't that an invitation, in a way?" she asked.

"Of course not!" the instructor said. "Come, we'll call his ship and have him removed. He should be sober by the time he gets out of sick bay—if he ever does. . . ."

"But where are the monsters?" Cross asked, leaning over the rail of the observation platform and gazing across the tarmac.

"There's a settlement of them on the other side of the mountains," Obronski said. "They're not permitted inside the port area."

"And we're not permitted outside—"

"That's right. So forget about them."

"But there must be some way to see them."

"Sure, there is. If you had your own ship you could land near the settlement. But the port authority would be pretty tough on you if you got caught. Besides, why should you want to see them? I know I wouldn't."

"I guess I wouldn't either," Cross lied.

He lowered his eyes, idly watched the payload of fallen ladies of the stars filing out of the lock, accompanied by their lovers.

"I keep wondering," Obronski said. "You'd think they'd have more sense."

"Who?"

"The ladies of the stars, who else? They've got the whole galaxy at their finger-

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tips and they go and let some space bum knock them up! Why?"

"Maybe they fall in love," Cross said.

"Love!" Obronski spat. "You've got a lot to learn, boy, even if you did make Second Mate on your fourth run. There's no love in space, and the only woman you'll ever have is the one you've got money enough to pay for!"

"Sure, I know," Cross said. He raised his eyes from the gangplank, looked out across the tarmac to where the rumpled hills formed green and purple preludes to the majestic line of mountains. I wonder what they're really like, he thought . . . Some day I'll find out.

"The Plenipotentiary from New Jericho presents his compliments, my lady," the house-mother said. "He was quite intrigued by her ladyship's film sequence and begs the honor of her company."

"For how long?" the Lady Berenice asked wearily.

"For tonight only. He is leaving WineWomanandSong in the morning."

"Very well."

The house-mother withdrewdrew, and after a moment the Lady Berenice heard the lift door sigh closed. She sat down to wait, wondering if she would hate this one as much as she had hated all the others, if she would hate herself tomorrow as much as she had hated herself on all the other tomorrows.

Presently, she heard the lift door sigh open, and then footsteps in the corridor. The knock—

She got up and opened the door. The Plenipotentiary from New Jericho was in his late nineties, toupéd, and refurbished to pass for a man of fifty. He was a far cry from the Emperor of the Universe.

The Lady Berenice repressed a shudder. "Come in," she said. . . .

New Tokyo was off the beaten path of the regular runs, but his new job with Falcon Lines took him to many of the out of the way places. He walked through the narrow streets of Rakuen, past the tile façades of the enchanting houses, past the foyers where the mama sans sat, wearing their timeless smiles. Pretty kimonoed girls leaned out over low balconies, laughing down with starlight in their hair.

He remembered a passage he had read a long time ago,

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when he was a cabin boy on the *Perseus*, and he welcomed the words into his mind, let them flow softly through his thoughts—

I am lonely with the loneliness that comes to all men in womanless ships, whether they be ships at sea or ships in space; and if there be no woman to greet me when my ship reaches continent or planet, then I shall be lonely beyond all loneliness, beyond all capacity to endure . . .

A girl standing on the balcony just above caught his eye, perhaps because of the way the starlight touched her face, perhaps because of her wistful smile. He paused in the street, in the cool night, looking up at her. Her hair was black, and deftly piled into an elaborate coiffeur. Her eyebrows made him think of birds in flight. She touched her breast. "Hisako," she said softly, and he went back to the foyer he had just passed and told the mama san whom he wanted.

She could tell by the coldness of her cheeks that her face had gone white, and she could tell by the look in the examiner's eyes that it would be futile to protest his indictment, that no matter what she said, Gomorrah was going to be her next—and last—port of call.

But the charge was so monstrous, so untrue, that she *had to* dispute it. "You must be mistaken," she said. "I can't possibly be—be that way!"

"Who is your lover?" the examiner asked coldly.

"But I have no lover. I'm trying to tell you that. I've *always* used my field!"

The examiner shrugged. "Be a fool and protect him then, if you want to. I should think, though, that you'd want to expose him, that you'd want him to share the responsibility."

"But I'm *not* protecting him. There simply isn't any such person. You *must* be mistaken, or else my field is defective."

"I've been in this business a long time," the examiner said. "I don't make mistakes. And I've never heard of a defective field." He opened the door. "Book passage to Gomorrah for the Lady Berenice and confiscate her C-field," he told his assistant. "And put her in custody till her ship leaves."

"Passage for one?"

The examiner looked at the Lady Berenice. "Well?"

She returned his gaze defiantly. "One," she said.

The evangelist had set up his portable pulpit just out-

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side the spaceport, and Cross wandered over to the fringe of the crowd to listen. The *Pandora* didn't have clearance till tomorrow, and his passenger wouldn't be coming on board till shortly before blastoff. In a way, he was glad of that. He had always felt guilty about escorting fallen ladies of the stars to Gomorrah, and this time it would be worse, for, on his last stop there, he had visited the settlement beyond the mountains and seen the monsters . . .

The evangelist was an emaciated young man with dark, tortured eyes. As he talked, he waved his arms and paced back and forth. The night sky of Thais arched incongruously above him, and the ithyphallic structures of WineWomenandSong formed an ironic backdrop for his imprecations.

"They brazenly walked the streets of Earth, and now they brazenly walk the streets of the new worlds—and you, you scum, you dregs of humanity, fawn at their feet like dogs, waiting for their meretricious favors, waiting for the contemptible privilege of spending your hard-earned dollars in order to experience the appetites they feed but never satisfy—"

"How do *you* know?" someone in the crowd shouted.

There was a scattering of laughter, but the evangelist continued, unperturbed: "I tell you that happiness does not lie in such lascivious pursuits, that nothing but misery can result from consorting with the ladies of the stars! They have come to you, not to heal your loneliness, but to deprive you of your earnings, your respect, your—"

"But at least they came!" the heckler shouted again. "That's more than you can say for the women sitting self-righteously in their suburban houses back on Earth, patting themselves on the back for having given birth to the children they were afraid *not* to have!"

"But let me ask you this," the evangelist said, singling out his antagonist and pointing at him with his finger. "*Why* did they come?"

"First I'll tell you why *we* came," the heckler answered. "We came because we were basically insecure and needed to prove to others that we were something more than they thought us to be, and thereby prove to ourselves that we are something more than what we really are. And yet, for all our bravado, we remain mere men, terrified, in

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our hearts, of the abysses we claim to have conquered, alone, afraid, unwanted—Now is it wrong for a woman to feel the same as a man, to have the same frustrations, the same needs? And is it wrong if she fulfills herself in the only way modern society has left open for her, especially when by so doing she supplies a factor without which there could be no space travel, no raw materials for the stay at homes on Earth to turn into mechanical gadgets, ornate wigwams and four-wheel golden calves—"

"But they're prostitutes!" the evangelist screamed. *"Prostitutes!"*

"Sure, they're prostitutes—to you, and to the people on Earth. But to us, they're women, the only women we can ever know, can ever have. And if you must have something to condemn, then condemn the prostitution corporations, for they, and they alone, are responsible for the cold, loveless efficiency of their products!"

"Prostitutes—"

An ugly murmur began in the crowd, rose swiftly into a roar. Cross felt himself being drawn into the maelstrom, heard his own voice blending with the voices of the others. He saw the whiteness of the evangelist's face, saw the silhouette of the descending police copter, and then the frightened figure on the shaking pulpit fumbling for the lowered rope ladder. When he was firmly secured on the ladder, and the copter was rising, the evangelist shook his fist at the mob he had created, shouting: "Armageddon is on hand, and every sinning one of you, every glorified streetwalker and her lover, shall perish in the flames!"

There were some things you knew without quite knowing how you knew them, and the moment she had seen him standing in the lock of the *Pandora* she had known that he was the one.

But it was impossible, she had kept telling herself. Utterly impossible. And then, after escorting her to her cabin, he had mentioned *A Priori,* and she had remembered a spaceman telling her once that, in *A Priori,* almost *anything* was possible, and that, during an *A Priori* storm, *everything* was possible.

She still didn't quite understand, standing in the shower now, the misted spray gently bombarding her skin. But she had acted, and would continue to act, on the assumption that

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what the spaceman had told her was true, and on the additional assumption that the impossible would be less impossible if she cooperated with it. She felt perfectly justified in what she was doing and in what she intended to do: after all, even a monster was entitled to a father, and anyway, what was going to happen had already happened weeks ago.

"Yes?" she answered, when the knock sounded on the door.

"Your luggage, my lady."

She turned off the shower and wrapped the ship's towel she had selected earlier, around her body. Then she crossed the room and opened the door.

His eyes widened slightly at the sight of her, but his lean face remained impassive. "Set them inside, please," she said.

It was impossible for him to avoid touching her, and the contact, according to everything she had been taught, should have precipitated the first advance. It did not. He withdrew hurriedly, keeping his eyes averted.

"If you wish anything further, I'll be in my cabin," he said. He turned to go.

At first she was bewildered. Then, suddenly, she remembered that he was only a pilot, and that a lady of the stars was probably as far beyond his aspirations as she was beyond his pocketbook.

Some of her recently acquired assurance left her. "Wait," she said.

"Yes?"

"How—how long will we be in *A Priori?*"

"A little over four hours, ship's time."

"Is—is there any likelihood of a time storm?"

"There's always a chance of a time storm," he said. "But don't worry, my lady. If the conditions for one are present, we'll be contacted by the port authority in time to avoid it."

"But suppose something should go wrong. Suppose we weren't informed in time and did get involved in one. What would happen then?"

He raised his eyes, finally, and looked directly into hers. An expression of surprise touched his face. Presently: "As you may know, my lady," he said, "*A Priori* is merely the result of the separation of pure space and pure time from the thing-in-itself, or from basic reality. Once separated, pure space can be contracted to the extent where a parsec equals .59 kilometers. Usually pure time contracts accordingly, but sometimes

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there is a slight discrepancy, and certain phases of *A Priori* contain more time than space. If we should become involved in one of these phases —or storms, if you like—we would lose our awareness of our objective reality and proceed to relive a subjective and sporadic playback of our pasts. So all that could happen to us, actually, are the things that have already happened to us—with the difference that we would relive not only our own experiences, but one another's as well; in pure time, individuality does not exist."

"But wouldn't our objective reality be affected?"

He nodded. "It *could* be," he said, "since, in the absence of any real passage of time, it would be in temporal ratio to our involvement in our pasts, which might force it into a different time plane altogether."

She dropped her eyes. "Then—then in spite of what you said before, something could happen after all—something that hasn't happened before."

"I suppose so, my lady . . . Will that be all?"

"Yes—for now."

"I'll be in my cabin . . ."

After he had gone she closed the door but did not lock it, then she let the towel slip to the floor and went over and lay down on the couch. He would be back, she knew—there was no other answer—and when he returned she would welcome him the way she had welcomed all the others—

No, not quite the same, she thought, frowning. He was, after all, the father-to-be of her child-to-be, her—her monster-to-be. But, child or monster, it was—would be—his flesh and blood as well as hers, and that, she realized suddenly, was something quite unique—and quite strangely wonderful.

She was disconcerted, at first, when the walls of the room began to shimmer, not because she had doubted that there would be a time storm, but because she had expected him to be in her arms when it broke. Then she remembered something else she had heard about time storms.

Like hurricanes, they had eyes. . . .

Cross stirred on the couch, sat up. The storm was over and gone. The Lady Berenice's eyes were closed. Her breathing was soft, almost imperceptible. Her face, bereft now of all the hardness and the cynicism civilization

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had imposed upon it, was like a little girl's.

He knew her, now, almost as well as she knew herself—

And she—she knew him almost as well as *he* knew *himself*—

As he sat there, watching her, a feeling of tenderness he had never known before, came over him, and then he thought —But she's a lady of the stars—

And then—But she's a woman, too, the only kind of woman I can ever know, or have—the mother of my child-to-be—

And then—She tricked me. She knew, she must have guessed—

And then—No, she had no more free will, really, than I did. There is no free will in an *A Priori* storm, any more than there is decency or compassion or love in a civilization created and maintained by opportunists—

And then—But this—this may be love, and if it isn't love, could it not be turned into love, under the right circumstances, in the right environment—

On Gomorrah?—

"Gomorrah, my lady."

Her bags were packed and setting just inside the door. She picked one up and he took the other. She was wearing a white morning dress, and her hair made him think more than ever of Martian maize, but her eyes no longer reminded him of the ice lakes of Frigidia. The ice lakes of Frigidia never melted . . .

She followed him down the spiral companionway to the open lock. He heard her gasp when she looked out over the unexpected vista of fields and farmhouses, of hills and woods and rivers. "But this can't be Gomorrah," she said. "Where—where's the spaceport?"

"On the other side of the mountains," Cross said. "They will be coming for us soon, and we'll have to go back and go through all the red tape ports are noted for. But first, I wanted you to see the monsters."

She lowered her eyes to the fields surrounding the ship, her face pale. Presently he heard her gasp again, and then he heard the whir of the children's wings and their gay morning laughter. "Why—why they aren't monsters at all," she said. She gazed wide-eyed at the sight before them.

"Their parents and their parents' parents are," Cross said. "At least in the eyes of the Earth Council and the prostitution corporations. But

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then, I suspect that even a bluebird would seem like a monster to *tyrannosaurus rex* . . . You see, the mutation required three generations for completion—a possibility that the Earth Council failed to take into consideration."

"But why don't they take it into consideration now? Why should such a marvelous miracle as this be kept secret?"

"The corporation lobbyists are a powerful group—and you can imagine what a development like this could do to their business. Not only that, I suspect that they have an inherent fear of angels. But it's only a matter of time before the Earth Council will be forced to act, and in the meantime, the 'monsters' will have an opportunity to develop a society of their own."

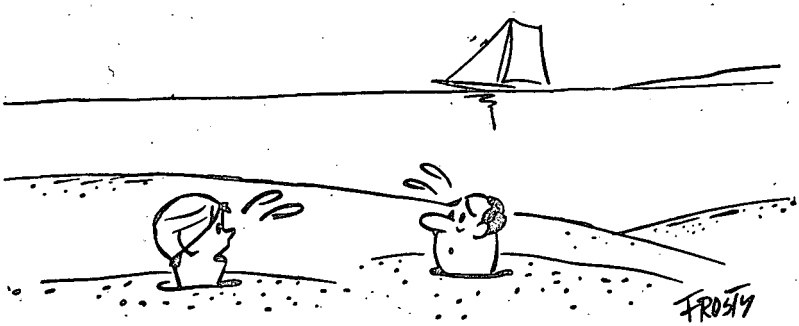
The first Gomorrite, a pretty, blue-eyed girl with cupid-wings, landed lightly in the lock. "Welcome to Gomorrah," she said.

The Lady Berenice reached out and took her hand. "Why—she's adorable!"

"She is, my lady," Cross said. "All of them are."

"Stop calling me 'my lady'!" Then: "Will—will my great-grandchildren look like that?"

"*Our* great-grandchildren will, my la— My—Berenice. . . ." THE END



"No wonder nobody else was on this part of the beach . . . it's quicksand!"

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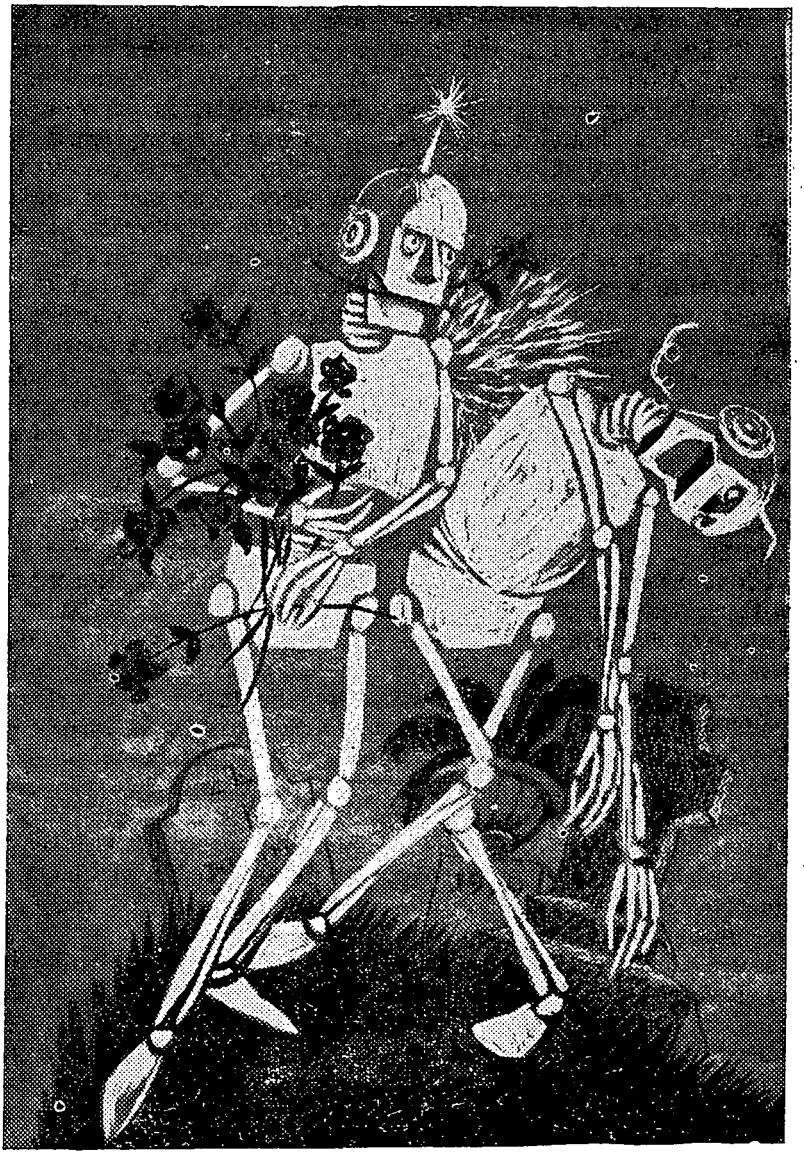

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The Stainless Steel Leech

By HARRISON DENMARK

Illustrator BLAIR

No man — or machine — is a friend to the werebot. Except Fritz. . . . a sort of man.

THEY'RE really afraid of this place.

During the day they'll clank around the headstones, if they're ordered to, but even Central can't make them search at night, despite the ultras and the infras—and they'll never enter a mausoleum.

Which makes things nice for me.

They're superstitious, it's a part of the circuitry. They were designed to serve man, and during his brief time on the earth, awe and devotion, as well as dread, were automatic things. Even the last man, dead Kennington, commanded every robot in existence while he lived. His person was a thing of veneration, and all his orders were obeyed.

And a man is a man, alive or dead—which is why the graveyards are a combination of hell, heaven, and strange feedback, and will remain apart from the cities so long as the earth endures.

But even as I mock them they are looking behind the stones and peering into the gullies. They are searching for—and afraid they might find—me.

I, the unjunked, am legend. Once out of a million assemblies a defective such as I might appear and go undetected, until too late.

At will, I could cut the circuit that connected me with Central Control, and be a free 'bot, and master of my own movements. I liked to visit the cemeteries, because they were quiet and different from the maddening stamp-stamp of the presses and the clanking of the crowds; I liked

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to look at the green and red and yellow and blue things that grew about the graves. And I did not fear these places, for that circuit, too, was defective. So when I was discovered they removed my vite-box and threw me on the junk heap.

But the next day I was gone, and their fear was great.

I no longer possess a self-contained power unit, but the freak coils within my chest act as storage batteries. They require frequent recharging, however, and there is only one way to do that.

The werebot is the most frightful legend whispered among the gleaming steel towers, when the night wind sighs with its burden of fears out of the past, from days when non-metal beings walked the earth. The half-lifes, the preyers upon order, still cry darkness within the vite-box of every 'bot.

I, the discontent, the unjunked, live here in Rosewood Park, among the dogwood and myrtle, the headstones and broken angels, with Fritz—another legend—in our deep and peaceful mausoleum.

FRITZ is a vampire, which is a terrible and tragic thing. He is so undernourished that he can no longer move about, but he cannot die either, so he lies in his casket and dreams of times gone by. One day, he will ask me to carry him outside into the sunlight, and I will watch him shrivel and dim into peace and nothingness and dust. I hope he does not ask me soon.

We talk. At night, when the moon is full and he feels strong enough, he tells me of his better days, in places called Austria and Hungary, where he, too, was feared and hunted.

". . . But only a stainless steel leech can get blood out of a stone—or a robot," he said last night. "It is a proud and lonely thing to be a stainless steel leech—you are possibly the only one of your kind in existence. Live up to your reputation! Hound them! Drain them! Leave your mark on a thousand steel throats!"

And he was right. He is always right. And he knows more about these things than I.

"Kennington!" his thin, bloodless lips smiled. "Oh, what a duel we fought! He was the last man on earth, and I the last vampire. For ten years I tried to drain him. I got at him twice, but he was from the Old Country and knew what precautions to take. Once he learned of my existence, he issued a wooden stake to every robot—but I had forty-two graves in those days and they never found me. They did come close, though. . . .

"But at night, ah, at night!" he chuckled. "Then things were reversed! I was the hunter and he the prey!

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"I remember his frantic questing after the last few sprays of garlic and wolfsbane on earth, the crucifix assembly-lines he kept in operation around the clock—irreligious soul that he was! I was genuinely sorry when he died, in peace. Not so much because I hadn't gotten to drain him properly, but because he was a worthy opponent and a suitable antagonist. What a game we played!"

His husky voice weakened.

"He sleeps a scant three hundred paces from here, bleaching and dry. His is the great marble tomb by the gate . . . Please gather roses tomorrow and place them upon it."

I agreed that I would, for there is a closer kinship between the two of us than between myself and any 'bot, despite the dictates of resemblance. And I must keep my word, before this day passes into evening and although there are searchers above, for such is the law of my nature.

"Damn them!(He taught me that word.) Damn them!" I say. "I'm coming up! Beware, gentle 'bots! I shall walk among you and you shall not know me. I shall join in the search, and you will think I am one of you. I shall gather the red flowers for dead Kennington, rubbing shoulders with you, and Fritz will smile at the joke."

I CLIMB the cracked and hollow steps, the east already spilling twilight, and the sun half-lidded in the west.

I emerge.

The roses live on the wall across the road. From great twisting tubes of vine, with heads brighter than any rust, they burn like danger lights on a control panel, but moistly.

One, two, three roses for Kennington. Four, five . . .

"What are you doing, 'bot?"

"Gathering roses."

"You are supposed to be searching for the werebot. Has something damaged you?"

"No, I'm all right," I say, and I fix him where he stands, by bumping against his shoulder. The circuit completed, I drain his vite-box until I am filled.

"You are the werebot!" he intones weakly.

He falls with a crash.

. . . Six, seven, eight roses for Kennington, dead Kennington, dead as the 'bot at my feet—more dead—for he once lived a full, organic life, nearer to Fritz's or my own than to theirs.

"What happened here, 'bot?"

"He is stopped, and I am picking roses," I tell them.

There are four 'bots and an Over.

"It is time you left this place," I say. "Shortly it will be night and the werebot will walk. Leave, or he will end you."

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"You stopped him!" says the Over. "You are the werebot!"

I bunch all the flowers against my chest with one arm and turn to face them. The Over, a large special-order 'bot, moves toward me. Others are approaching from all directions. He had sent out a call.

"You are a strange and terrible thing," he is saying, "and you must be junked, for the sake of the community."

He seizes me and I drop Kennington's flowers. I cannot drain him.

My coils are already loaded near their capacity, and he is specially insulated.

There are dozens around me now, fearing and hating. They will junk me and I will lie beside Kennington. "Rust in peace," they will say . . . I am sorry that I cannot keep my promise to Fritz.

"Release him!"

No!

It is shrouded and moldering Fritz in the doorway of the mausoleum, swaying, clutching at the stone. He always knows . . .

"Release him! I, a human, order it."

He is ashen and gasping, and the sunlight is doing awful things to him.

—The ancient circuits click and suddenly I am free.

"Yes, master," says the Over. "We did not know . . ."

"Seize that robot!"

He points a shaking, emaciated finger at him.

"He is the werebot," he gasps. "Destroy him! The one gathering flowers was obeying my orders. Leave him here with me."

He falls to his knees and the final darts of day pierce his flesh.

"And go! All the rest of you! Quickly! It is my order that no robot ever enter another graveyard again!"

He collapses within and I know that now there are only bone and bits of rotted shroud on the doorstep of our home.

Fritz has had his final joke—a human masquerade.

I take the roses to Kennington, as the silent 'bots file out through the gate forever, bearing the unprotesting Overbot with them. I place the roses at the foot of the monument—Kennington's and Fritz's—the monument of the last, strange, truly living ones.

Now only I remain unjunked.

In the final light of the sun I see them drive a stake through the Over's vite-box and bury him at the crossroads.

Then they hurry back toward their towers of steel, of plastic.

I gather up what remains of Fritz and carry him down to his box. The bones are brittle, and silent.

. . . It is a very proud and very lonely thing to be a stainless steel leech.

THE END

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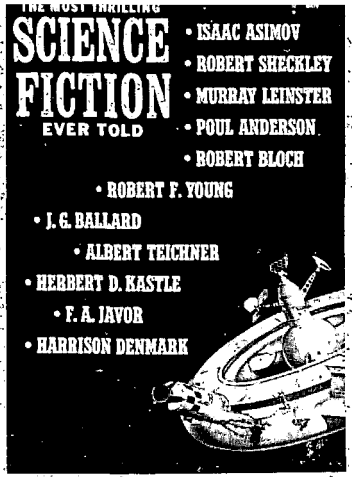

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